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**“The Greatest Good for the Greatest Number”: American Land
Redistribution in East and Southeast Asia, 1945-1969**

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Redistribution in East and Southeast Asia, 1945-1969**

by

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Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at Austin
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

**The University of Texas at Austin
May 2016**

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr. Mark Metzler for his years of kind advising, to all the members of my committee for their patience and feedback, to the University of Texas History Department and Department of Asian Studies for their support, to Dr. Shigeru Akita, Dr. Shōichi Watanabe, and Tōhoku Gakuin Daigaku for making my research in Japan possible, to all the people in Japan who helped with interviews, research, or just everyday tasks, and to all of the archives and archivists that facilitated my research in the United States.

A special thanks to my parents, grandparents, brother, aunt, cousin, and most of all my wife, none of whom made a habit of asking when the dissertation would be finished, but all of whom helped it happen in visible and invisible ways.

“The Greatest Good for the Greatest Number”: American Land Redistribution in East and Southeast Asia, 1945-1969

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

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Between 1945 and 1969, United States policymakers advocated the redistribution of farmland in East and Southeast Asian countries including Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and South Vietnam. Land reformers hoped to prevent communist insurgencies in rural Asia and promote economic growth, but land redistribution was not merely a means to an end. Mid-century American policymakers viewed the equalization of landownership as an end unto itself because of their shared Jeffersonian ideology. Despite a consistent worldview and a largely consistent methodology, reformers faced different challenges and achieved varying degrees of success in the countries they hoped to reform.

The example of the Philippines, while arguably more Latin American than Asian with respect to landownership patterns, serves as a prologue to the American land reform experience in Asia. The postwar reforms begin with the well-known example of Japan, which set the standard for subsequent reforms both in terms of policy specifics and outcomes. The nearly-contemporary example of South Korea provides a unique twist since the United States itself was the peninsula's largest landowner at the time of the reform. The American contributions to Taiwan's post-1949 reform are recovered in chapter 4, while chapter 5 delves into bureaucratic infighting in Washington as a prelude to the final, troubled episode of South Vietnam.

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INTRODUCTION

DEFINING LAND REFORM

Land redistribution was a major component of twentieth-century American policy in Asia.¹ In the Philippines in the early 1900s, in Japan and South Korea in the late 1940s, and in Taiwan and South Vietnam in the 1950s and 1960s, American policymakers and their counterparts in local governments made efforts to lower rents and transfer land to the landless at low cost. Economic development theories and Jeffersonian ideology, no less than counterinsurgency, were impulses behind these American-backed land reforms. To the American way of thinking, the ideal farm household owned and cultivated its own land, neither lending out excess land nor borrowing more than its members could work themselves. Economic development advocates and counterinsurgency experts believed that tenancy created dependencies and inequities that constrained the economic and civic potential of Asian farmers and the developing nations where they lived. Reformers believed that land redistribution could solve economic and political challenges simultaneously in those nations. They believed, too, that land redistribution was a way to export and recreate historical American values rooted in the quasi-mythical idea of the Jeffersonian yeoman and the family farm.

Per historian Aurora Almeda Martin, land reform is “the reorganization of land holding arrangements, in terms of tenureship and ownership.” Land reform codifies and

¹ “America” will serve as shorthand for the United States. My transliteration of Asian words and names are purposefully inconsistent; older systems are prevalent in documents that are cited and quoted, but certain newer formulations are more familiar to modern readers and are used at the discretion of the author.

liberalizes the terms under which people borrow land, but most importantly it involves reducing the number of landless tenants by transferring land ownership from large or absentee landlords to the farmers who actually till the soil. That definition was also true for the reformers in this study, who made land redistribution their first priority among a host of other rural reforms including expanded credit facilities and technological improvements. This study focuses almost exclusively on redistribution, since the majority of American policymakers believed it must come first, and here the term “land reform” is to be understood as synonymous with redistribution.²

The United States was not alone in seeking land redistribution during the Cold War, a conflict whose effective end date is debatable but that was undoubtedly at its peak during the bulk of this study’s timeframe. Communist land reforms do not fall under the scope of this study, which is rooted in the American sphere of influence and is concerned with demonstrating a pervasive and consistent pattern of American reformist thought. Yet it may be said briefly that the existence of communist land reforms in China, North Korea, North Vietnam, and other countries adjacent to where the United States and its allies conducted their reforms can give the impression that Washington supported redistribution reactively rather than proactively, or as a necessary evil. The more thorough studies of America’s Asian policies in the early Cold War — Takemae Eiji and Ronald Dore for Japan, Bruce Cumings for Korea, Edward Miller for Vietnam — recognize a multiplicity of motivations on the American side, at least in the single cases

² Aurora L. Almeda Martin, "Philippine Land Reform Cycles: Perpetuating U.S. Colonial Policy," *Philippine Studies* 47 (1999), 183.

they study, but it is not difficult to find scholars who emphasize anticommunism at the exclusion of economic and Jeffersonian motives for land redistribution. The latter view underestimates the deep-seated and at times utopian belief in the power of land redistribution exhibited by American policymakers of diverse political persuasions. Moreover, communism was not the only “ism” that reformers hoped to eradicate by giving peasants land: they saw land reform as a way of propelling “backward” economies out of “feudalism,” the system of lords and serfs, and into the modern era.³

The story that emerges here, a story rooted in American archives, is about the ambitions and specific policies of American land reformers as their nation assumed international hegemony after World War II. Men who were of middle age in the middle of the century had seen, and sometimes served in, two world wars, and those doing government work had learned to see international issues as matters of great importance. The question was rarely *whether* to have a policy about rural Asia, nor was there very much disagreement about *what* that policy should be. These men believed in independent, “family-sized” farms as a matter of course, whether because they themselves were born on farms or because they remembered from their schooling that Thomas Jefferson had said no man could be politically independent if he were economically dependent. When disagreements arose within the policymaking community, they generally concerned technical details like prices and plot sizes, or public relations questions like how much publicity land reform should have and who should take the credit for it.

³ The work of Dore and Eiji will appear in chapter 2, Cumings in chapter 3, and Miller in chapter 6. Scholars who describe land reform mainly in terms of anticommunism include Al McCoy and Kim Seong Bo, whose work also appears in later chapters.

THE IDEOLOGY OF THE AMERICAN LAND REFORMER

As an ideology remembered from grade school or picked up from vague rhetoric, Thomas Jefferson's moral elevation of independent farmers was an unchallenged assumption shared by midcentury American bureaucrats. Though not farmers themselves, some had been born on farms, and they could still envision themselves as guardians and advocates of rural folk. On evenings and weekends they may have taken their families to popular western films like *Shane*, the third highest-grossing movie of 1953 and a seminal work of American mythmaking in which a lone cowboy defends small homesteaders from a greedy cattle baron. It would have flattered the designers of Asian land reforms to think of themselves as modern day Shanes, protecting Asian yeomen from their economic oppressors.

Egalitarian land distribution was held by American policymakers to be a positive and even a necessary thing for the maintenance of a healthy society, but of all the countries involved in this study, only the United States did not experience land redistribution. There was thus a certain hypocrisy to Washington's stance, and a flaw in their unquestioned assumption about America's Jeffersonian character. Mid-20th century policymakers thought that they were in the business of exporting longstanding American values to the feudal East, but anybody who looked at contemporary or historical American tenure arrangements could not have been so sure.

The great land giveaways of the late 19th century, the homestead acts, benefitted small farmers ("small" in the American context meant 160 acres, an enormous amount by Asian standards) and large railroad, ranching, and mining interests alike; these acts were

not land reforms, because they did not aspire to economic leveling, but the delineation of tracts into 65-hectare “family size” plots, called homesteads, gestured toward the Jeffersonian vision of independent cultivators. One homestead act that did explicitly attempt to address economic inequalities, the Southern Homestead Act of 1866 that made public lands available to black and white tenants and sharecroppers at low cost, was repealed at the end of Reconstruction before many of the intended beneficiaries could take advantage of it. The Dawes Act of 1887, which attempted to divvy up tribally-owned Native American lands into plots that could be managed by individual Indian families, also held up small-scale, independent ownership as the ideal, but its more significant and insidious result was to further the fragmentation of native culture and open up more native-held land to Anglo-American development.⁴

By 1940, just before America's entry into World War II, about thirty million citizens lived on farms. Nine million of those were counted as part of the agricultural workforce. About a third of the people working as farmers, 3.1 million, owned all of their farmland, and an additional 615,000 owned part of their land. Renters accounted for 2.4 million of the nation's agricultural workforce. Farm laborers without any tenurial rights constituted the largest single group at about 3.2 million individuals. Access to amenities

⁴ On the Southern Homestead Act, and for a detailed discussion of the struggles African-American participants faced when searching for and retaining farmland amid widespread fraud, see Neil Canaday, Charles Reback, and Kristen Stowe, “Race and Local Knowledge: New Evidence from the Southern Homestead Act,” *The Review of Black Political Economy* 42, no. 4 (December 2015). A short but ambitious book comparing the 1862 Homestead Act with other expansionary and equalizing policies is Harold M. Hyman, *American Singularity: The 1787 Northwest Ordinance, the 1862 Homestead and Morrill Acts, and the 1944 G.I. Bill* (University of Georgia Press, 1987). A recent work on the Dawes Act provides a great deal of information about the Lockean and Jeffersonian background of Native American dispossession, as well as a discussion of recent historiography; see Charles Geisler, “Disowned by the Ownership Society: How Native Americans Lost their Land,” *Rural Sociology* 79, no. 1 (March 2014).

such as indoor plumbing, “telephones, electricity, trucks, and automobiles” was more common among owners, less common among renters, and least common among landless laborers. The proportion of tenancy in the United States in the 1940s was not dissimilar from the Asian countries that would soon be subject to American-backed land reforms.⁵

Redistribution of private land, the central and indispensable feature of American-backed land reform in Asia, was rarely considered as a solution for the United States, and even more rarely put forth as a serious possibility outside of the question of captured Confederate lands during and immediately after the Civil War. Yet making tenants into owners through the sale of public land had strong appeal as an economic salve, and policymakers occasionally pursued it in the United States. A Depression-era law, the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act of 1937, is one example of particular pertinence to this study: it aimed to assist tenants with the purchase of certain public lands, and was written by some of the same people who would later work on the land reform in South Korea.⁶

THE INTERBUREAU COMMITTEE ON POSTWAR PROBLEMS

Edward Miller, whose recent work on Vietnam is addressed in chapter 6, has

⁵ Working Group on Farm Tenure of the Interbureau Committee on Postwar Problems, “Farm Tenure Improvement in the United States: Policy Objectives, Problems, and Recommendations,” December 1945, Daniel L. Goldy Papers, Harry S Truman Presidential Library (hereafter HSTL), 35, 65.

⁶ Charles Kenneth Roberts argues that the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act was excessively vague, particularly in its inability to define success beyond timely loan repayments. See Charles Kenneth Roberts, “Client Failures and Supervised Credit in the Farm Security Administration,” *Agricultural History* 87, no. 3 (Summer 2013). See also chapter 3 of this study for the connection of this act to the South Korean reform. During the Great Depression, a number of writers and organizations criticized New Deal programs like the Bankhead-Jones Act for being too conservative, and advocated their own land reform agendas; see Jess Gilbert and Steve Brown, “Alternative Land Reform Proposals in the 1930s: The Nashville Agrarians and the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union,” *Agricultural History* 55, no. 4 (October, 1981). The essential work on the debate over redistributing ex-Confederate lands is Claude Oubre, *Forty Acres and a Mule: The Freedmen’s Bureau and Black Land Ownership* (Louisiana State University Press, 1978).

observed that the work of many postwar Asian land reformers began during the New Deal inside the Department of Agriculture. Wolf Ladejinsky, for example, had been hired by an Agriculture official close to President Franklin Roosevelt. After World War II American reformers would try to remake Asian farmers in the Jeffersonian image, but during the 1930s New Dealers envisioned remaking *American* farmers in *their* image — that is, into “tolerant and civic-minded students of society oriented towards reform.”⁷

One such reformer whose name will appear several times in this study was Arthur Raper, who later worked on land redistribution in Japan and Taiwan. At the end of World War II Raper participated in discussions within the Agriculture Department about tenure reform inside the United States. Memories of the agricultural depression that followed World War I and the dislocations and foreclosures of the 1930s were still very much alive in 1945 when Agriculture convened a body called the Interbureau Committee on Postwar Problems to discuss parallels “between the present post-war period and the last one.” There were dozens of members of this committee, most of whom worked for the Agriculture Department, and they feared that with the end of the war American “farmers may be headed for a repetition of some of the heartbreaking experiences” of the 1920s and 1930s. The committee assigned sixteen-members, Raper among them, to a working group that would look into the domestic farm tenancy situation. In December 1945 the group issued several strong statements about land tenure in the United States, prefiguring in many ways the discussions that would take place in Asia but deviating in one crucial

⁷ Edward Garvey Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Harvard University Press, 2013), 58.

respect — the question of redistributing privately-held property.⁸

Raper and his colleagues' discussion of American tenure in 1945 is especially self-reflective, and reveals much about why policymakers considered small farms an antidote to unhealthy tenure conditions. Raper was already a vocal advocate of vulnerable farmers, having written in 1939 that “[i]f the ex-slave and poorer white families had received forty acres and a mule [during Reconstruction]. . . it could have provided a broad economic base for the development of democracy in the South.” Raper and his colleagues' “guiding principle,” the same principle that would soon animate American land reform efforts in Asia, was that farmers ought to own the land they tilled, ideally in “family-sized units.” The group cited Jefferson's view that such a pattern of agriculture was the best fit for democracy and the best guarantor of prosperity. The high degree to which policymakers' thinking about landownership in the domestic context matched policymakers' ideas abroad is a further indication that the Cold War era struggle for the hearts and minds of the world's peasantry did not by itself account for Washington's interest in land redistribution. Rural impoverishment and inequality ran counter to America's self-image as a democratic, progressive, prosperous nation, and what the group called the “long-supported concept” of the virtues of family farming.⁹

The recently concluded war had reshaped conditions for American farmers and, as we shall see in each case study, for farmers in Asian countries as well. The price of food in the United States rose during the war, which put money in farmers' pockets after years

⁸ Working Group on Farm Tenure, 2. See chapters 2 and 4 of the present study for more on Raper's contributions to Asian land reform.

⁹ Arthur Raper, review of *Forty Acres and Steel Mules*, by H. Clarence Nixon, *The Journal of Politics* 1, no. 1 (February 1939), 107; Working Group on Farm Tenure, 5, 24.

of depression, but opportunities for off-farm employment had also increased. Rural families who saw their incomes rise during the war years often invested a portion of their earnings in war bonds rather than investing directly in their farms. Many farmers entered the industrial workforce, and in some cases their plots had been consolidated into larger holdings that required hired, and as it happened landless, laborers. The land tenure working group noted with approval a wartime trend away from tenancy, but worried that “advancement up the agricultural ladder” might become increasingly difficult in the coming years.¹⁰

Two of the most important objectives of postwar agricultural policy, as revealed in the working group’s study, were equality of both income and property. The group’s topmost concern was “an equitable distribution of farm income,” and further down the list but still prominent was its concern that the nation’s farmland be “used and controlled by the many, rather than the few.” It is significant for the understanding of early American postwar planning that Raper and the rest of the Agriculture Department bureaucrats in the group spoke not merely of equality of opportunity, but of equal outcomes. When Raper and the Agriculture Department became involved over the next several years with Asian land redistribution programs, they intended not only to boost rural economies on a macro scale, but to preserve the institution of family farming against tendencies toward consolidation. The working group recognized the difficulty in assigning a quantitative value to the term “family farm,” and acreage numbers that seemed fitting in America were always far larger than in crowded Asia, but the spirit of

¹⁰ Working Group on Farm Tenure, 8.

the term whether in the American context or the Asian one was that it was a farm small enough to be operated without tenants or hired labor.¹¹

When it came to expropriation from private owners, however, the recommendations of Raper and his fellow researchers stopped well short of compulsory redistribution, the key feature of American land reform policy in Asia. American landowners could be “encouraged” to develop flexible rent payment schedules, make lease terms clearer, longer, and more favorable, and share equitably with their tenants any aid received from the government. “[S]uch inducements. . . will give tenants an incentive to put forth their best efforts,” said the working group. Although officials identified land tenure challenges in America that were broadly similar to those abroad, their suggested program for domestic reform lacked the essential component of land reform overseas: the forcible break-up of larger estates. In fact, the land tenure researchers expressed disapproval of the French for a recent policy that had followed the inefficient method of parceling out farmland in more or less equal quantities per farmer; this was, in fact, exactly the kind of redistribution that would take place in Japan under American occupation before the end of the decade. There was a fundamental double standard. For all the real belief in the “longstanding” assumptions of its position on family farms, the government of the United States would probably never do for its own people what it advocated abroad.¹²

¹¹ Working Group on Farm Tenure, 5-6.

¹² Working Group on Farm Tenure, 13-14, 26-27. For more on the Agriculture Department’s markedly pro-redistribution stance in Asia, see chapter 5 of the present study.

Officials concerned with land policy did not believe that the private ownership of property, a linchpin of liberalism since John Locke, should constitute a *carte blanche* to hoard land or to use it selfishly. The 1945 land tenure paper exhibited a precocious concern with ecological stewardship. “Users of our land today ought not to possess absolute rights to despoil or destroy it,” the authors stated. They made reference to landowners as “stewards” with inherent responsibilities to future generations. In one lengthy passage, they stressed that it was impermissible for owners to use land in a way contrary to the general welfare. They bemoaned the precedence of property rights “over human rights,” and considered the principle of legal equality between citizens a “fallacy” if unequal economic conditions constrained freedom of choice. Though a title to land certainly gave an owner a certain amount of proprietary rights, it did not mean that “he owns the land from the heights of the heavens to the core of the earth, to do with as he pleases.” For Raper and other Agriculture Department staffers to express such unabashed skepticism of unlimited private property rights, as well as to call repeatedly for financial and social equality between tenure groups, showed more than a modicum of progressive intent even if redistribution *per se* was not on the table. The Department of Agriculture would emerge as a strong voice for Asian land redistribution and employ some of the most successful and prolific personnel working on Asian land reforms, from Raper to Ladejinsky to members of an Interagency Committee in the 1950s, about which more will be said in chapter 5.¹³

¹³ Working Group on Farm Tenure, 27-28, 31.

A TAXONOMY OF LAND REFORM

This study is not concerned with creating a new theoretical schema of land reform, but with identifying patterns in American motives, methods, achievements, and failures. However, two ways of categorizing Asian land reforms — one well known to students of the field and the other obscure — are implicitly expanded upon or challenged.

English sociologist R.P. Dore spent a great deal of time in Japanese villages researching his definitive monograph on the occupation-era land reform, a work “unlikely to be superseded.” The reform the Americans successfully enacted between 1947 and 1949 was, in Dore’s terminology, a Stage II reform. Stage II reforms equalize landownership by reducing the power of “Type II” landlords: landlords who acquired land through purchase, and who may have acquired their wealth in farming, business, trade, or moneylending. By reducing the amount of land these landlords control, more people can acquire deeds to the land they work. In practice, a Stage II reform shifts land from private, title-holding owners to rural people who lack land; it is a redistribution, and it is the kind of land reform that American policymakers enacted or tried to enact in Asia in the period of this study.¹⁴

The precondition that made this sort of reform possible was a Stage I reform. A Stage I reform weakens the power of a “Type I” landlord, namely a feudal lord. Feudal landlords did not acquire land through purchase, at least not ostensibly; they acquired it initially through military conquest or, more often, as a gift from kings and warlords. They maintained it through heredity. Land was not a commodity, and this situation could lead

¹⁴ R.P. Dore, *Land Reform in Japan* (New York: Schocken Books, 1985 edition), xxii-xxx

to *de facto* tenant ownership, as in Japan, since land was not to be bought and sold and therefore remained under the tillage of the same peasant families generation after generation. A Stage I land reform, which Dore thought had taken place in Japan in the late 19th century and in various European countries between the 18th century and the period after World War I, dispossessed feudal landlords by issuing deeds to actual cultivators. Cultivators could then sell their land to other private individuals if they wished (or, as it happened, if they had no economic alternative.) American reformers in the mid-twentieth century still often believed that their land redistributions were targeted at “feudal” structures, but their Stage II reforms in places like Japan and South Korea benefited greatly from the land surveys and rosters of deeds that had been introduced decades earlier as part of Stage I reforms.¹⁵

Though American land reformers did not use Dore’s terminology, Dore’s conceptualization helps to account for American successes and suggests possible explanations for American failures. As will be seen, staffers in the American occupation of Japan, occupied South Korea, and the Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction in Nationalist-ruled Taiwan often acknowledged that without preexisting surveys and deed registries, the job of redistributing land would have been slower and costlier.

A lesser-known land reform schema splits the American-backed reforms, what Dore would call the Stage II reforms, into two further subgroups. Antonio Ledesma, a researcher for the University of Wisconsin’s large and at times influential Land Tenure

¹⁵ Dore, xxii-xxx. The comment about Dore’s work not being superseded — indeed, his firsthand observations in Japan cannot now be recreated — comes from Mark Metzler’s historiography of Occupied Japan, found in *A Companion to Japanese History*, ed. William Tsutsui (Wiley, 2007.)

Center, a center about which more will be said in this study, posited in 1976 that East and Southeast Asia had gone through two geographically-delineated waves of land reform during the 20th century. Ledesma's first period began “immediately at the end of the Second World War” and took place along the eastern perimeter of the Asian continent in Japan, China, Taiwan, and the Korean peninsula. These countries had particularly high population densities that made their need for land redistribution “most acute.” The second period, Ledesma said, began in the mid-1950s and took place almost entirely in Southeast Asia. Land reform legislation was most “voluminous” in the Philippines and Vietnam, but also appeared in Burma, Malaysia, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Laos — several of these were communist in nature, not the American-backed reforms discussed in the present study; Ledesma’s taxonomy is geographic and temporal rather than ideological. Ledesma lumped the “ancient” powers of China and Japan in with nations Japan colonized during the twentieth century, Taiwan and Korea. These countries experienced land reforms designed to increase the number of landowners. The Southeast Asian group, on the other hand, was “colonized at various times over the last four centuries by competing Western powers.” Countries in this group, Ledesma said, followed the communist model of collectivizing agriculture under the ownership of the state.¹⁶

To the extent that the present study offers a taxonomy of land reform, it is grounded in the beliefs of the historical actors under consideration. The two types of reform that American land reformers thought existed between 1945 and 1969 were those

¹⁶ Antonio Ledesma, “Land Reform Programs in East and Southeast Asia: A Comparative Approach” (University of Wisconsin Land Tenure Center, 1976), 1-2.

conducted by communists and those conducted by non-communists. Only the latter type is discussed here. Among American-backed land reforms in East Asia during that period, there seems to be no reason to separate them geographically or methodologically; over a 25-year period American aims and methods were remarkably consistent in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and South Vietnam. The sociopolitical, economic, and historical contexts of land reform, however, varied in each of these countries, as did the outcomes of the reforms.

THE GOALS OF THIS STUDY

This study is concerned with demonstrating the continuity of a phenomenon. It does not challenge Dore's work, but rather adds to it by answering a different question. Dore's Stage I/Stage II structure explains "what" and "how," but is agnostic about motivations. Here the material and ideological concerns of American land reformers are brought to the fore in order to account for "why." The narrative that emerges challenges Ledesma's theory by stressing the continuity of those concerns — American land reformers wanted to increase equity, increase economic productivity, and increase rural contentment, and these motivations existed without respect to intra-Asian geographical and historical divisions. The 1953 Taiwan land reform law and the 1957 South Vietnamese law, for example, were each partly products of the same man, Wolf Ladejinsky, who was also a chief architect of the Japanese reform and later worked on land issues in the Indian subcontinent. His views and tactics changed little during the five decades he advocated for land redistribution across Asia, though after observing the

effects of inflation in Japan he would modify the way landlords were to be compensated in Taiwan and South Vietnam. Despite his efforts and the efforts of his colleagues there were differences in the content and outcome of reforms, but this study will argue that there were more commonalities than contrasts between the non-communist East and Southeast Asian land reforms of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s.

Still, the American-backed land reforms did differ in ways that this study addresses. Some were done virtually by fiat, under the occupation of the United States military, and others were pursued through small groups of advisors. They differed in the kind of compensation they offered to landlords and in the amount of tenancy they allowed to exist. Historical land arrangements in each country sometimes bore little resemblance to each other. A comparative study indicates that American-backed land reforms were more successful when the United States and its allies had a great deal of authority over and knowledge of tenure conditions.

Chapter 1 takes place well before the rest of the cases, examining the first instance of American land reform legislation in an occupied Asian nation: the Philippines in the first decade of the twentieth century. The purposes of that effort and the causes of its failure pave the way for the more detailed investigations to follow. In Chapter 2 the story moves into the post-World War II period with a lengthy examination of the land reform in occupied Japan, the standard by which other American-backed redistributions would be judged. Dore's positive assessment of the reform, an assessment that has withstood criticisms also addressed in the chapter, is not challenged by this retelling. Instead, the Japanese reform is placed in its proper context as the first of several similar

redistribution efforts in East and Southeast Asia, and as the event that seemed to justify the theories of enthusiastic reformers like Ladejinsky and Raper. Chapter 3 makes extensive use of land reformers' documents and recent Korean historiography to recount the little-known story of America's land reform efforts in South Korea between 1946 and 1950. What American occupation authorities accomplished prior to the Korean War was significant enough that the episode must be viewed as the reformers saw it — a qualified success. In chapter 4 the path of American-backed land redistribution enters areas not under direct American occupation, China and Taiwan. A Sino-American commission carried out land redistribution in parts of the mainland and throughout the island of Taiwan in the late 1940s and early 1950s. As in the case of Korea, this episode has not usually been viewed as part of the American land reform crusade, but American advisers ensured that the methods used successfully in Japan would be repeated in Taiwan. Rather than recounting a specific instance of land reform, chapter 5 expands upon this introduction by uncovering the details of policymaking within the American government. The wide support that land redistribution enjoyed in the 1950s is displayed in sometimes dramatic fashion, but disputes over publicity and authority repeatedly set different parts of the American bureaucracy against each other. Chapter 6 contains more examples of internecine fighting on the American side and reveals how these disputes both threatened and facilitated the establishment of land reform laws in South Vietnam. The failure to enact land redistribution in that country before it succumbed to its northern neighbor brings the 25-year arc of this study to an ignominious end.

This study uses, in addition to the standard hectare, units of land measurement native to the countries under consideration. The table below will help translate the most commonly-used units.

	Hectares	Acres
chō (Japan)	0.9917	2.451
jeongbo / chongbo (Korea)	0.9917	2.451
chia / jiǎ (Taiwan)	0.9699	2.3968

Table 1: Conversion Table for Selected Land Units

Chapter 1: The Philippines: A Pre-Cold War Prelude

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation mostly concerns post-World War II American-backed land reforms in East and Southeast Asia, but it rejects a chronologically-narrow explanation that casts land reform as a Cold War weapon against communist reformers who famously and successfully exploited peasant discontent with agrarian inequalities. The first time American policymakers tried to redistribute land in Asia took place over a decade before Lenin and his Bolsheviks created the world's first self-proclaimed Marxist government in Moscow, and while Mao Zedong was a child of ten. The case of the land reform effort in the American-occupied Philippines in the early 1900s is far removed in time from the postwar examples of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and South Vietnam, and it is presented here as a prelude in broad strokes. No attempt is made to fill the gap of decades between the early Philippine experience and the end of World War II in 1945, by which time geopolitical, technical, and ideological conditions in the world had changed. However, a glance at this inaugural episode demonstrates continuities in American motivations and methods, and helps to identify some of the cultural and technical challenges American reformers would repeatedly face.

The case of the Philippines demonstrates that insurgency and potential insurgency were significant motivators of land reform, but an insurgency need not be communistic to prompt American policymakers to prescribe land reform as an antidote. The specter of socialist upheaval in particular did exist before Russia's October Revolution of 1917, even within the United States where anarchist bomb-throwers, socialist writers, and

industrial strikers were viewed by the government, businesses, and middle-class reformers as threats to capitalism. Yet communism as a political and ideological movement among Asian peasants had not emerged as an issue in the minds of American policymakers, and land reform was already their preferred solution for a host of perceived problems in its Asian spheres of influence. The threat of rural-based insurgencies was the most immediate and the most dangerous of those problems, but it was hardly the only one: economic development and political democratization were more challenging, long-term goals that also had to begin, reformers believed, with the redistribution of farmland. These goals remained unchanged after World War II, but the strong anticommunist rhetoric of that period would sometimes distract from the subtler ideas that continued to motivate American land reformers. The early Philippines episode is therefore a convenient place to discuss the different motivations for American-backed land reform in relatively equal measure.

When the conclusion of the Philippine-American War (1899-1902) solidified the United States as an occupier of the islands rather than their liberator (as they might have been after defeating the Spanish in 1898), the American military governors set out to redistribute farmland. They confronted a land tenure system that was rife with inequality and therefore conducive of radical peasant activism. Despite their efforts, the land reform legislation of 1902-04 failed to significantly reduce high tenancy and rural inequality. Yet a personal connection may have inspired a much later and more successful reform: one of the governors of the Philippines who made land reform a priority was General Arthur

MacArthur, father of the future General Douglas MacArthur, who often spoke of his father's efforts while advocating the Japanese reform after World War II.

LAND AND CLASS UNDER THE SPANISH

The Spanish arrived in the Philippines in 1565 with no intention of transforming the new colony into a profitable exporter of agricultural products. The islands were “poorly endowed,” bereft of “obvious mineral or other treasured resources,” and attractive to the Spanish primarily due to their strategic location along the trade route between Mexico and China. In the late eighteenth century colonial administrators began to take an interest in the agricultural potential of the Philippines, and by then the Spanish crown had dispensed over one hundred land grants, called *encomiendas*, to its “loyal civic and military servants.” Each *encomienda* encompassed hundreds or thousands of hectares (1 hectare is equal to 10,000 square meters, or about two and a half acres), and frequently included entire Filipino villages and thousands of Filipino farmers.¹⁷

Into this situation came the friars, Catholic missionaries of various orders including Dominican, Franciscan, Jesuit, Augustinian, and Recollect. The friars went directly to rural Filipinos, proselytizing in several native languages. Those engaged in missionary work were, by law, the only Spaniards who could reside outside of Manila during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, including owners of *encomiendas* who therefore had little connection to the land they owned. The friars required agricultural

¹⁷ Jeffrey M. Riedinger, *Agrarian Reform in the Philippines: Democratic Transitions and Redistributive Reform* (Stanford University Press, 1995), 18; James Putzel, *A Captive Land: The Politics of Agrarian Reform in the Philippines* (London: Catholic Institute for International Relations, 1992), 44.

land to sustain their permanent missions throughout the Philippine archipelago, so as *encomienda* owners died, returned to Spain, or neglected their “rustic properties” to pursue more lucrative opportunities, the monastic orders “acquired through donation, sale, and auction the great majority of these lands.” By the middle of the seventeenth century the friars owned large chunks of the islands, particularly the main island of Luzon. The Philippines was an “empire of the friars,” and the monastic orders profited from their loans to villagers, the sale of rice grown on their lands, and the fixed rent they charged to tenants. Filipino elites who worked with the friars to administer farmland became known as *caciques*, a term that originated in the West Indies from the Taino word for “chief.” Filipino *caciques* received legal ownership of small parcels of land in return for their services, and this landed, local elite would complicate later land reform efforts.¹⁸

Spanish authorities became increasingly cognizant “of the friars' importance in preserving the Philippines as a Spanish colony” when the 1762-64 British occupation of Manila demonstrated the fragility of Spain’s far-flung empire. After Spain reclaimed Manila, it strengthened the Pacific outpost by stepping up the export of the islands' agricultural resources. Extensive and populated friar lands were crucial to this endeavor as agricultural production in the Philippines took on the trappings of New World *haciendas*. The term *hacienda* describes a large rural property worked by a “dependent

¹⁸ Luis Lichauco, “Land Settlement in the Philippines,” in *Land Tenure: Proceedings of the International Conference on Land Tenure and Related Problems in World Agriculture, Held at Madison, Wisconsin 1951*, eds. Kenneth H. Parsons, et al. (University of Wisconsin Press, 1956), 188; Jose E. Velmonte, “Farm Ownership and Tenancy in the Philippines,” in *Land Tenure*, 182; Dennis Morrow Roth, *The Friar Estates of the Philippines* (University of New Mexico Press, 1977), 25, 62, 147; Putzel, 44; Riedinger, 18. Some historians have noted that Franciscan statutes barred that order from acquiring land. There is some disagreement over Franciscans' adherence to that principle. See Putzel, 45, and Alvarez, 357.

labor force.” While Filipino villagers had always been subordinate, whether to *caciques* before and during Spanish imperialism or to the *caciques’* bosses, the friars, the relative position of agricultural laborers worsened as the commercialization of agriculture increased. Any “paternalistic aspects” of the friar missions vanished with the transition from a “basically subsistence and barter economy” to “an exchange and monetary economy.” Cash crops such as sugar and tobacco supplanted staple crops such as rice, and a commitment to landownership “became more firmly entrenched” within the friar estates.¹⁹

Wealthy Filipinos could benefit from the change. The landholding *caciques*, along with Chinese merchants and Filipino-Chinese *mestizos* (to use the Spanish term for people of mixed race) who often acted as middlemen in international trade and could become landowners either legally or in fact, sublet friar land to poor sharecroppers. The elite could dream of replacing the monastic and secular Spanish authorities with an oligarchy of their own, while peasant farmers desired to break free from tenancy, sharecropping, and debt. Both groups desired more control of the friar lands, and the incompatible aspirations of rich and poor Filipinos was one of the most important problems Americans faced when they took control of the islands in 1898.²⁰

¹⁹ Roth, 99, 149.

²⁰ Putzel, 49-50. Roth suggests that peasant resistance to the friars was as much the result of “liberal and revolutionary ideologies” among Manila university students in the nineteenth century as of economic exploitation (Roth, 2). The fact that Dr. José Rizal, a leading critic of the friars and organizer of peasant revolts, studied medicine and philosophy in Manila and Madrid seems to support this argument. Still, the material concerns of tenant farmers provided fertile ground for revolutionary ideas.

AMERICA'S "DILEMMA"

There were two important developments between the end of Spanish rule and the first American land reform legislation in 1902. The first occurred on December 10, 1898, the day the Philippines became an American territory. The Treaty of Paris contained a provision that "the new colonial power would respect existing property rights of private establishments, ecclesiastical bodies and individuals." In other words, the United States acknowledged the legitimacy of the friars' ownership of the most profitable land in the archipelago. Some observers who had not opposed the Spanish-American War, such as Mark Twain (arguably the most famous American in the world), found this provision profoundly objectionable. The New York Tribune reported Twain as saying, "Once I was not anti-imperialist. . . But I had not studied the Paris Treaty. When I found that it made us responsible for the protection of the friars and their property I changed my mind." In the United States, fresh off a sensationally-reported war against barbaric Spanish imperialism, the friars appeared to be the overlords of a feudal and exploitative agricultural system.²¹

The second development was America's decision to ally with the conservative faction of the Filipino resistance. This alliance began in 1897, when the U.S. Navy ferried resistance leader Emilio Aguinaldo to the Philippines from his exile in Hong Kong. In the early months of rebellion against the Spaniards in 1896, Aguinaldo had usurped leadership of the resistance movement from more radical advocates of peasant liberation.

²¹ Gary Scharnhorst, ed., *Mark Twain: The Complete Interviews* (University of Alabama Press, 2006), 358; Putzel, 52.

Aguinaldo, a Filipino-Chinese *mestizo*, led the fight against the Spanish “on behalf of the *ilustrados*,” another name for the landed elite. United States forces assisted Aguinaldo while they had a common enemy, but when Spain surrendered the islands and America decided not to recognize Aguinaldo's independent Philippine Republic, the relationship soured. When American forces eventually captured Aguinaldo, the guerrilla leader “appeal[ed] to his followers to surrender” and cooperate with the United States. Thus, the “landed oligarchy that dominated the shortlived Philippine Republic soon came to an understanding with the new colonial authorities.”²²

Despite Washington's promise to respect friar property and its hard-fought settlement with Filipino elites, land reform was on America's agenda as the fighting wound down in 1901-02. Two considerations explain this apparent contradiction. The first was that radical peasants continued to fight, in Anna Castrañada's words, for “a more egalitarian society. . . long after Aguinaldo and the other *ilustrados* were captured and resigned to defeat.” Since the question of land tenure was at the center of peasant discontent, colonial administrators understood that land reform could reduce “peasant resistance to US rule.” The second consideration was more ideological. American politicians sincerely believed that their method of governance was more “benevolent” than that of European powers, particularly the theocratic Spanish. Implicitly, the task of “[t]he American colonial project in the Philippine Islands was. . . to reconcile the consent that underlay American democratic ideology with the inherently coercive nature of

²² Stuart Creighton Miller, *"Benevolent Assimilation": The American Conquest of the Philippines, 1899-1903* (Yale University Press, 1982), 35-36, 170; Putzel, 50-51.

colonialism.” Redistributing friar lands was a way to resolve that contradiction and to “sell colonialism both in the United States and in the Philippine Islands.”²³

With treaty obligations and upper class Filipinos on one side, and security and moral concerns on the other, the question of land redistribution was “arguably the most pertinent example of the dilemma that challenged US authorities” as they began to administer their new colony. A solution to the agrarian problem had to remain within the boundaries of America's legal and ideological commitment “to private property and free enterprise,” but “a landlord-tenant hacienda type of agriculture” made many Americans squeamish, Congressmen and military governors included.²⁴

In Al McCoy and Francisco Scarano’s 2009 anthology *The Colonial Crucible*, historian Paul Hutchcroft recounts how Jeffersonianism offered a way out of the bind. Jefferson’s philosophy stressed the virtues of small-scale “yeoman” (i.e. landowning) farmers, “full legal equality” between individuals, and “decentralized forms of governance.” Since American policymakers at the turn of the century believed that “American agriculture, especially outside of the deep south, had developed on the basis of family-size farms. . . this was seen as the ideal for Philippine agriculture as well.” While Hutchcroft is skeptical about the validity of that assumption, Washington and its representatives in the Philippines had reason to believe it. The U.S. Department of Agriculture surveyed elite and poor Filipinos to determine their degree of support for

²³ Anna Leah Fidelis T. Castrañeda, “Spanish Structure, American Theory: The Legal Foundations of a Tropical New Deal in the Philippine Islands, 1898-1935,” in *The Colonial Crucible: Empire in the Making of the Modern American State*, eds. Alfred W. McCoy and Francisco A. Scarano (University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 366; Putzel, 50, 53.

²⁴ Chester L. Hunt, “The Nemesis of American Agricultural Policy in the Philippines: From the Friar Lands to the Hardie Report: An Overview,” *Asian Profile* 14, no. 2 (April 1986), 133.

both hacienda-style agriculture and small, private plots. A field report concluded that “leading Filipinos of the dominating class. . . engaged in the tobacco and sugar trade. . . are in favor of the plantation system,” while in “the smaller towns. . . individual ownership of land, as against corporations, is almost universally favored.”²⁵

Accordingly the American Congress passed the Philippine Organic Act of 1902. The act “set forth the principle that the government is trustee of a great public domain which is to be developed to promote farm ownership for the greatest number” of Filipinos. To that end, it limited individual landowners to sixteen hectares of land and corporations to 1,024 hectares. However, these limits applied only to land in the “public domain” — i.e. not already registered to people. Friar lands, of course, were privately owned by the monastic orders, and the Treaty of Paris bound the United States to respect those property rights. Of course, friar estates occupied “the best agricultural lands in the country. . . and were favorably situated in the provinces near Manila,” so if colonial authorities could not dispense friar lands to the tenants who worked them, no real redistribution could take place.²⁶

THE FAILURE OF AMERICA’S FIRST ASIAN LAND REFORM

American colonial administrators in Manila pursued two strategies to overcome obstacles to meaningful farmland redistribution. In the first place, they hoped to induce

²⁵ Paul D. Hutchcroft, “The Hazards of Jeffersonianism: Challenges of State Building in the United States and Its Empire,” in *The Colonial Crucible: Empire in the Making of the Modern American State*, eds. Alfred W. McCoy and Francisco A. Scarano, (University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 375; Martin, 189.

²⁶ Jose N. Endriga, “The Friar Lands Settlement: Promise and Performance,” *Philippine Journal of Public Administration* 14, no. 4 (1970), 397; Velmonte, 182; Putzel, 52.

tenants and laborers to create new, isolated homesteads on unsettled public land. Second, the government in Manila would indeed purchase and re-sell the all-important friar lands pending an agreement with the friars. Fundamental flaws in the execution of these strategies led to disappointing results, and America's failure to resolve landownership inequalities haunted the Philippines for the remainder of the 20th century.²⁷

A Public Land Act passed by Congress in 1902 established the homesteading method. There was substantially more land in the public domain than in the friar estates, despite the friars' status as the largest landowning group in the country and the superior location and quality of their land, and American administrators could dispose of public land without running afoul of the Treaty of Paris. To acquire sixteen hectares of public land, the legal maximum for an individual owner, a buyer had to pay a “nominal fee” of ten pesos, complete a “lengthy process of application,” establish the homestead, and cultivate the land for five years. These requirements were “patterned after the settlement of the United States' western territories.” However, the system proved unsuccessful in the Philippines. Although homesteading attempts continued into the 1930s, only about 35,000 people ever took advantage of it. Furthermore, many who made the attempt were not Filipinos, but rather “retired American soldiers who had decided to make the Philippines their permanent domicile.” Future American-backed land reforms elsewhere

²⁷ Leslie Bauzon (see note below) identifies more than two, and perhaps as many as six, American land reform strategies in the Philippines. However, the two identified in the present study are the most comprehensive. Others include tenancy reforms in the 1930s, which lie outside the scope of this study, and an effort to systematize land registration, which is supplementary to the fundamental objective of redistribution.

would take pains to specify who was entitled to buy land, and the tenants actually working the land up for sale would always have first priority.²⁸

Homesteading proved unsuccessful for a variety of material reasons. Public domain lands were isolated and undeveloped, whereas friar lands were well-fertilized and already under the cultivation of entire villages of Filipino farmers. Such farmers showed little enthusiasm to move away from Luzon, “the rice bowl of the Philippines,” to distant and less-developed areas such as the southern island of Mindanao. Insufficient infrastructure in the outlying islands and a lack of governmental assistance to homesteaders further reduced the appeal of homesteading. The application process required literacy, spare time, and money, three things not all farmers had in the war-ravaged Philippines. The five years homesteaders were required to cultivate their land before receiving a title involved great uncertainty and no small risk of failure, and many peasants simply could not afford to take the chance.²⁹

Historians debate the significance of Filipino cultural attitudes toward homesteads. Some suggest that the tradition of dwelling in kinship communities meant that few Filipinos wanted to move to an isolated farmhouse. Others reject the cultural argument and lay the blame at the feet of American administrators, who “did not fully realize. . . the difficulty of developing [a] way of providing needed services.” Given the reality of the material obstacles to peasant relocation, and the fact that the best land in the country was inside friar estates, rejecting homesteading was a sound economic decision

²⁸ Leslie E. Bauzon, *Philippine Agrarian Reform, 1880-1965 : The Revolution That Never Was* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1975), 4; Hunt, 135-6; Putzel, 53; Martin, 189, 191, Lichauco, 189.

²⁹ Harold D. Koone and Lewis E. Gleek, *Land Reform in the Philippines* (U.S. Department of State: Agency for International Development, 1970), 189; Martin, 191.

for many. Had the terms of the homesteading program been more favorable, more than the 35,000 individuals who participated in it may have done so.³⁰

The second land reform strategy, the purchase of friar lands for resale to tenant farmers, was even more difficult for Americans to enact. At the turn of the century, the friars held about 200,000 hectares of land farmed by about 60,000 tenants. American administrators could not simply seize friar lands without violating their own and international law. Future American president William Howard Taft, then head of the investigative Philippine Commission and later a Governor General of the islands, understood that the problem of friar lands was rife with political pitfalls. But the issue demanded attention if Filipino tenants were to be given their own land, as the creation of a productive, peaceful, and democratic colony required.³¹

Fortunately for Taft and other American administrators, at the turn of the century the friars had reason to want to leave the Philippines. Ninety percent of Filipinos identified themselves as Roman Catholic, but many of them also viewed the friars as “corrupt, cruel, and immoral.” Tenants accused the monastic orders of landgrabbing, absenteeism, and unjust taxation practices. When the revolution began in 1896, “Filipino tenants. . . as part of the revolutionary move refused to pay their rents” and demanded the expulsion of the friars from the islands. The Filipino and *mestizo* elites who aspired to take the friars' place were no more beloved. During the brief existence of the Philippine Republic, president Aguinaldo “and his followers literally drove the friars from their

³⁰ Putzel, 53; Hunt, 137.

³¹ Frank T. Reuter, “William Howard Taft and the Separation of Church and State in the Philippines,” *Journal of Church and State* 24, no. 1 (Winter 1982), 106-108, 111; Roth, 2.

parishes and estates” to the confines of Manila, and “many others reportedly were imprisoned, tortured, and killed.” The American government, hoping to resolve the question in a way that would not allow the hated friars to continue inspiring unrest, instructed Taft to “seek. . . a just settlement of the controversies. . . which have caused strife and bloodshed in the past.” The beleaguered friars were in fact willing to sell their estates to American authorities.³²

The position of the Vatican complicated matters. The Church's representative on the islands, New Orleans archbishop Placide Chapelle, went “over Taft's head” and sent “angry cablegrams” to Washington “insisting that the friars be restored to their parishes, by military force if necessary.” Taft, in return, went over Chapelle's head. As Governor General he traveled to Rome in 1902 for an audience with Pope Leo XIII. The Vatican was eager to establish closer diplomatic relations with the United States, an ascendant imperial power, and indicated its willingness “to consider 'the exigencies arising from the new circumstances'” in the Philippines, namely the transition from Spanish to American rule. Taft told the 90-year-old pope that Washington would purchase the friar lands for a “full and fair” amount, and the Vatican agreed “in principle” to the offer. Unfortunately, the Taft mission and the Vatican could not reach a final agreement. The Vatican wanted to preserve a place for the friars in Filipino cities, hospitals, and schools, while the American government wanted the controversial orders expelled from the islands entirely. Negotiations broke down. The episode eventually resulted in the first, but not the last,

³² David Alvarez, “Purely a Business Matter: The Taft Mission to the Vatican,” *Diplomatic History* 16, no. 3 (June 1992), 358; Reuter, 108, 110; Lichauco, 188; Bauzon, 10; Endriga, 399, 401.

political attack on a would-be American land reformer when, during the 1908 presidential election, Democratic candidate William Jennings Bryan attempted to use Taft's 1902 visit to the Vatican against him.³³

In the end, Taft resolved the friar problem from the Governor General's palace in Manila. By 1903, “death, retirement, and voluntary repatriation” had reduced the number of friars in the Philippines “to 246 individuals from a figure of 1,013 in 1898.” The few remaining friars voluntarily sold approximately 90% of their holdings, 158,676 hectares of land, to the American colonial government for a sum of \$6,930,462.70. Taft considered this purchase sufficient to rid “the islands of an issue dangerous to the peace and prosperity of the people.”³⁴

Of course, what was truly required to achieve peace and property was the distribution of former friar lands to the tenants who worked them. American policymakers attempted, but failed, to redistribute the land they had bought. The Friar Lands Act (FLA) passed by Congress in 1904 was supposed to make the land available to its present occupants. But the colonial government wanted to recoup the money it had spent, and therefore leased the land in parcels for “the purchase price plus interest.” Those who bought ex-friar land had to pay for it in full, in equal annual installments over a ten (later extended to twenty-five) year period, plus 4% interest for each missed installment. Peasants who borrowed money in order to buy the land faced 8% annual

³³ Reuter, 112; Alvarez, 360, 363-5. See also Edgar Albert Hornig, “The Religious Issue in the Taft-Bryan Duel of 1908,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 105, no. 6 (November 1961). See also Chapter 6 of the present study for later examples of land reform-related political storms.

³⁴ Alvarez, 369; Endriga, 402.

interest rates. When borrowers could not meet their payment obligations, the government initiated foreclosure proceedings and recouped the land.³⁵

American administrators hoped that “within ten years” of the FLA “all the [friar] lands would have been turned over to the original occupants or sold to new buyers.” In actuality, “[b]y the 1930s only a small percentage of the area of the former friar estates was owned by peasant-cultivators.” Filipino elites who helped Americans administer the Philippines eventually acquired the bulk of it. Ordinary peasants simply could not meet the government's asking price. When “[t]he government found itself the owner of large, unoccupied, unsaleable estates and. . . faced. . . the alternatives of selling the land to big buyers or losing a great part of the money invested in them, they solved the problem in the most realistic way”: by selling to the only people who could afford to buy. While “at least one US sugar corporation” acquired friar land, the great majority of buyers were wealthy Filipinos who intended to maintain tenancy and the hacienda system. In the future, American-backed land reforms in Asia would get cheaper and cheaper to avoid this problem.³⁶

THE ROLE OF THE SUGAR INDUSTRY

Some historians have argued that the American sugar industry received favorable treatment from colonial administrators to the detriment of redistributive efforts. These scholars view President McKinley as “the master plotter behind the whole scheme of” turning the Philippines over to the Sugar Trust, “an American government monopoly.” It

³⁵ Roth, 1; Martin, 193; Endriga, 404.

³⁶ Endriga, 406, 410, 412-13; Roth, 1; Putzel, 53

is true that “[u]nder the aegis of the American colonial state, the sugar industry was modernised, infrastructures built. . . [and] duty-free access to the lucrative US market was assured.” In addition to sixteen-hectare individual homesteads, “[t]he PLA also provided for leases of government land for commercial plantations, typically twenty-five years with the option for periodic renewal.” Corporations had to navigate the same bureaucratic maze as did individuals, but wealthy entities such as sugar corporations were in a better position than small farmers to do so. Congress investigated, but allowed to stand, a deal in which authorities in Manila bent the maximum hectare rule to sell 22,000 hectares of former friar land to the American Sugar Refining Corporation. By the 1920s, many American corporations owned more hectares than the law allowed, and the establishment of free trade between the Philippines and the United States made administrators unlikely to pursue policies that could adversely affect exporters.³⁷

Yet despite the sugar industry's gains during the period of American rule in the Philippines, the influence of the sugar lobby in the earliest years of American colonial rule was minimal. During the debate over the Organic Act of 1902, Governor-General Taft “and the US business lobby in Manila had asked for a limit of” about 8,000 hectares for corporate landholdings, but the American farm lobby and Congress insisted on the much lower limit of 1,024 hectares. American administrators were genuinely “horrificed

³⁷ Filomeno V. Aguilar, Jr. "Sugar Planter-State Relations and Labour Processes in Colonial Philippines Haciendas," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 22, no. 1 (October 1994), 68; Violeta Lopez-Gonzaga and Michelle Decena, "Negros in Transition: 1899-1905," *Philippine Studies* 38 (1990), 107; Martin, 190; Putzel, 53-55; Koone and Gleeck, 6. Lopez-Gonzaga and Decena are “following the reasoning” of Luzviminda B. Francisco and Jonathan S. Fast's *Conspiracy for Empire: Big Business, Corruption and the Politics of Imperialism in America, 1876-1907* (1985), and do not necessarily share the belief that the Sugar Trust was the most important motivator of American expansion. Another notable work that touts the role of capitalist interests in imperial endeavors is Walter LaFeber's *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898*.

by the feudal conditions of the Philippine countryside” and hoped that homesteading and the sale of friar lands would alleviate peasant suffering. A focus on the sugar industry's gains obscures the fact that far greater gains accrued to members of the Filipino land-holding oligarchy, who were potential rivals to American corporate interests.³⁸

THE LEGACY OF FAILURE

The American land reform in the Philippines in the first decade of the twentieth century failed because colonial administrators did not make public lands and former friar lands affordable to poor tenants. This failure facilitated the rise of a native Filipino oligarchy, and with the later rise of the sugar industry it echoed the exploitative pattern of Spanish development on the islands. Some have explained this outcome as the result of American ignorance, noting that the turn of the century was “an era when the principles and techniques of land reform were not as well understood or appreciated as they are today.” On the contrary, Americans understood very well that land reform offered a solution to rural discontent and a path to democratization, and accordingly placed it on the agenda very early in the occupation. Throughout the period of American rule, “colonial administrators repeatedly acknowledged the poverty and social, political, and economic inequities attendant on the prevailing patterns of landownership and distribution of wealth.” However, their unwillingness to pay for reform out of the public

³⁸ Endriga, 410, 412; Hunt, 133; Putzel, 52.

coffer sabotaged their efforts. American colonial policymakers did not make land or credit accessible to those who needed it most.³⁹

Tenancy rates skyrocketed throughout the period of American rule and beyond. The 60,000 tenants on friar lands in 1903 constituted a relatively small percentage of the overall population of the islands, but with the failure of land reform the proportion of tenants rose. Tenancy was always highest in central Luzon, the heart of friar territory and “the rice bowl of the Philippines,” where the rate of landlessness among farm workers reached 70-85% by 1963. Some scholars see “the skewed distribution of income” in the Philippines today, where agribusiness is the largest employer but rural areas are impoverished, as a direct result of “the unequal distribution of land” that has plagued the country since Spanish times. In other words, the institution of land ownership determined who prospered and who did not in the Philippines.⁴⁰

At the beginning of this chapter, one positive legacy of the Philippines episode was mentioned in passing. General Arthur MacArthur was just one of several military governors of the Philippines, and his tenure did not last long enough for him to influence the outcome of the land reform. Yet his son Douglas remembered him as a would-be savior of Filipino farmers, and when Douglas became Supreme Commander of the occupation of Japan after World War II he spoke of his father often when discussing the need for land redistribution. Even in cases where there was no father-son connection, the next generation of American land reformers in Asia would refine their methods and

³⁹ Roth, 1; Reidinger, 21;

⁴⁰ Koone and Glecek, 2; Martin, 182, 185.

remain committed to the idea of redistribution. They would enjoy greater successes but also suffer more disappointing failures.

Chapter 2: Japan: Nothing “Quite as Successful”

INTRODUCTION

Even critics of the occupation land redistribution acknowledge it as the most successful of Washington's land reform efforts. It began and ended on schedule, and met the objective of reducing Japan's tenancy rate to nearly nothing. As in the cases of South Korea, Taiwan, and South Vietnam, American and local authorities (once the latter were compelled to participate) hoped that land redistribution would encourage economic growth and discourage political agitation. That the land reform seemed to meet and even exceed those expectations meant that American reformers could, and did, later point to Japan as an example of the power of their methodology. While no attempt is made in this or in any other chapter to exhaustively recount the debates of the secondary literature, much of which has become dated, this chapter does address contemporaneous and subsequent criticisms of the reform while confirming the majority view, espoused most famously by Dore, that the land reform was a near-unqualified success. New anecdotes serve to humanize a reform that is now fading from living memory, but the aim of this chapter is to establish the postwar American commitment to land redistribution, explain the methods by which Americans pursued it in a country over which they exerted direct influence, and to stress that the Japanese example emboldened American reformers to try to repeat the feat. A glance at the Japanese background to reform, and a consideration of how the postwar Japanese government tried to soften the reform the Americans demanded, paradoxically illustrates both the validity of American critiques and the local organizational strengths that allowed their reform to succeed.

The occupation of Japan made possible the application of postwar land reformers' theories, and the political context in which reform took place may account for its exceptional degree of success. Except for the early part of the South Korean land reform, the later cases did not take place under direct American occupation. The much earlier example of the Philippines, well known to General Douglas MacArthur who headed the occupation of Japan, shows that occupation alone did not guarantee a successful redistribution, but Americans' power to compel reform was certainly essential to the strength of the program that emerged in Japan.

MacArthur and the land reformers who worked for him in his Tokyo general headquarters (GHQ) hoped to eradicate "pernicious ills" in Japanese culture and in Japanese agriculture specifically. The specter of communism came to the fore very quickly, but at first the "ills" afflicting Japan were held to be militarism and, especially in the agricultural context, feudalism. Japanese landlords were too small to be analogous to European feudal lords in terms of wealth, but American policymakers feared their stifling effect on the economic and political redevelopment of Japan, and set out to create a broad base of independent, entrepreneurial landowners who would support a liberal, anticommunist government. Inasmuch as "Western democracy had been based on the classical economic liberalism of the individual yeoman farmer," American reformers would attempt to foster "an agrarian middle class based on a family farm tied firmly to a free market economy."⁴¹

⁴¹ Al McCoy, "Land Reform as Counter-Revolution: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Tenant Farmers of Asia," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 3, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 1971), 15, 18.

THE JAPANESE BACKGROUND

High tenancy and farmland fragmentation were longstanding problems that successive Japanese governments had tried to address, but they seemed only to worsen as Japan approached the twentieth century. One of the first acts of the modernizing Meiji government (1868-1912) was a land reform that, in the words of a 1970 USAID report whose implicit purpose was to inform American land reformers in South Vietnam about previous American successes, aimed to free the peasantry “from feudal bondage” (a goal also attributed to the Americans’ own postwar land reform.) The USAID retrospective is useful as a reflection of American land reformers’ rhetoric, essentially unchanged over two and a half postwar decades, and as a compendium of the statistics that they considered relevant in the countries where they operated during that time. However, the assessment of a more detached scholar is more useful for assessing the consequences of historical reforms. To English economist R.P. Dore, the Meiji land reform was a “Stage I” land reform: a commodification of land leading to a shift in legal ownership from hereditary lords to wealthy landlords and land speculators. This new, legal recognition of the longstanding but unsanctioned reality that land might change hands based on the economic calculus of buyers and sellers rather than through primogeniture inheritance paved the way for the American’s land reform, a “Stage II” reform that further fragmented estates with an aim toward equalizing ownership between economic classes. The Meiji reform established a system of private ownership, officially recognizing cultivators’ ownership of small plots so that 70% of Japan's farmland “came under the

ownership of owner or part-owner cultivators who made up about 80% of all farmers.”⁴³

Yet liberating a “feudal” peasantry is not, in Dore’s conception, a consequence of Stage I reforms, and it did not happen in Meiji Japan. Rather, it was *land* that was “liberated” from conventional restrictions on its transference, and many farmers, unable to afford new plots or to make their existing plots profitable, sold what land they had to speculators and larger owners. Around 360,000 small owner-operators sold their deeds between 1883 and 1890. New jobs were becoming available in urban areas and attracted some of the dispossessed, but most of the 360,000 smallholders who sold their land remained in the agriculture sector and became tenants. By 1900 the share of farmers who were full-time tenants rose from about 20% to about 40%. The Meiji government did not protect tenants from eviction, and its revocation of laws that had prevented land from being sold meant that landlords frequently sold land to the highest bidders, who were rarely tenants.⁴⁴

The primary culprit in the wave of bankruptcies and sharp uptick in tenancy was the tax reform that accompanied the Meiji land reform. The government introduced a cash-based system of taxation to replace the in-kind payments that had existed previously, forcing farmers “to sell the produce soon after harvest — a season when prices were low.” In 1873 the new tax was fixed at 4% of the value of an owner's land,

⁴³ Harold Voelkner, “Land Reform in Japan” in *Land Reform in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan* (U.S. Agency for International Development, 1970), 5, 8-11, 17; Dore, xxii-xxx.

⁴⁴ Sreenivasaiah Seshaiiah, *Land Reform and Social Change in a Japanese Village* (Bangalore: Shiny Publications, 1980), 2-4; Dore, xxii-xxx; Voelkner, 5, 8-11, 17. For more on inheritance practices and the way households and villages managed land before the Meiji reform, see Iwamoto Noriaki, “Local conceptions of land and land use and the reform of Japanese agriculture” in edited *Farmers and Village Life in Twentieth Century Japan* by Ann Waswo and Nishida Yoshiaki.

not the value of the crop. The rate fell as low as 3% in the 1880s before rising to 5.5% in 1904. The central government took 75% of the revenue from this tax while local governments took the remaining 25%. The system benefited the Meiji government more than owners, because in land-poor, densely-populated Japan, the price of land could easily grow faster than the price of food grown on that land. As late as 1892, almost 86% of government revenue came from the land tax. The share of government funds that came from the land tax fell to just 43% in 1912 “and to barely nominal amounts by the Second World War.” At the same time, the portion of each harvest’s proceeds that went to pay the tax grew ever smaller, from 37% in 1868 to 17% in 1885 and 8% in 1936. The amount of food and its value were increasing, but not enough to allow many independent farmers to keep their plots.⁴⁵

Scholars in Japan and the West have identified the late 19th century as a period of “bi-polarisation”: landlords grew more powerful, and the tenant class grew larger. The Meiji land reform had changed the way wealth was extracted from farms, but in a way that benefited the government and landowners rather than tenants and independent owner-operators. Though the tax law had changed how landlords paid the state, tenants still paid their rent in kind. To meet their tax obligations amid falling food prices (Meiji deflationary policies resulted in sharp price dips in the 1880s), landlords claimed greater and greater shares of each harvest, up from 28% in 1868 to 46% in 1890. Tenants succeeded in winning temporary reprieves from landlords in response to poor harvests, but since rent was paid in kind “it was not customary to reduce rents in response to price

⁴⁵ Voelkner, 17, 53-54, Table 2a, Table 5; Dore 72.

falls.” Later, when depression hit in the 1930s, tenancy disputes grew from an average of 2000 per year in the 1920s to over 6000 per year between 1935 and 1937. Yet the portion of each crop that landlords took remained around 40% into World War II.⁴⁶

Still, Meiji agricultural policies did bring about significant improvements in rural life in aspects other than tenure, and indirectly contributed to the success of the later land redistribution. The Meiji government supported the development of new agricultural methods like “deep ploughing” and scientific pest control, and opened “new commercial opportunities for farmers” by creating rail lines used to transport rice from rural to urban areas. American reformers were later grateful that the Meiji government had also carried out the best land surveys in centuries. They did so primarily to identify new plots and bring them into the system of taxation, but the surveys would prove useful for land reformers in ensuring the plots subject to redistribution were in fact redistributed. The Meiji government also sponsored projects relating to rural “infrastructure, agricultural schools and extension, farmer organization, production and distribution of chemicals, new breeds and varieties [of seeds], and credit.” Despite the depression of the 1930s, agricultural output in Japan grew spectacularly during the Meiji and Taishō periods; 90% more rice was produced in 1944 than in 1880. Output also became more diverse, with new varieties of crops in cultivation, since the Meiji government did not restrict land use the way the Tokugawa government had.⁴⁷

Throughout the Meiji and Taishō (1912-1926) periods, though, tenants

⁴⁶ Penelope Francks, *Technology and Agricultural Development in Pre-War Japan* (Yale University Press, 1984), 146, 148-49; Voelkner, 17, 53-54, Table 2a, Table 5; Dore 72.

⁴⁷ Francks, *Technology and Agricultural Development*, 144-47; Wolf Ladejinsky, *Civil Affairs Handbook: Japan — Section 7: Agriculture* (Army Service Forces, 1944), x; Voelkner, 6, 17.

consistently failed to win concessions from Japan's landlord-dominated legislature, the Diet. Several bills, many of which originated with tenant organizations and farmer unions (groups which were permitted and even encouraged), proposed changes to landlord-tenant relations. The 1924 Farm Tenancy Conciliation Law was the result of one such bill, and created new oversight committees for resolving the rising number of landlord-tenant disputes. As Dore noted, the law did nothing to address tenant concerns or prevent disputes, only adjudicate them. Suk Yeon Kim has more recently argued that that law was a genuine compromise and that tenants did benefit from the conciliations the law facilitated — it was not merely a tool of the landlords. Still, a 1931 bill supported by tenant organization failed to pass the Diet at all, while laws on the books like a 1926 policy providing for government loans to tenants who wished to buy land failed to receive adequate financial support during the prewar period. Ann Waswo has even written about police harassment and imprisonment of tenant union leaders in the 1920s, though she also notes that bureaucrats pressured landlords to voluntarily lower rents.⁴⁸

As the Japanese military gained influence and finally de facto control over the government in the first decade of the Shōwa period (1926-1989), attention to rural poverty increased in a bid to raise the fitness of young, rural recruits. The Army lent its rhetorical support to a relatively new ethos known as *nōhonshugi*, usually translated as “agrarianism” or, more literally, “agriculture-as-the-basis-ism.” For the past few decades

⁴⁸ Suk Yeon Kim, “Japan’s Farm Tenancy Conciliation Law of 1924: Ishiguro Tadaatsu and his Statist Agrarianism,” *현대일본학회, <일본연구논총> 32권0호* (2010), 64-65; Ann Waswo, “Japanese Tenant Unions in the 1920s,” in *Farmers and Village Life in Twentieth Century Japan*, edited by Ann Waswo and Nishida Yoshiaki (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 114-117; Dore, 82; Voelkner, 20-24.

a cadre of Japanese intellectuals had worked to formalize the ideology, which extolled “the simple virtues of rural life. . . filial piety, devotion to work and duty, [and] frugality.” Unlike the American ideology of Jeffersonianism, *nōhonshugi* did not place a moral value on landownership itself, but the value it attached to agricultural labor may explain why even pro-landlord politicians took small steps to address tenant discontent both before and after the war — that is to say, landlord-backed politicians could benefit politically by appearing to strengthen the average farmers whom *nōhonshugi* idolized, so long as they did not inflict too much damage on their wealthier constituents’ interests. This calculus would become nakedly evident after the war when the Japanese legislature appeared to support reform in deference to popular opinion while actually resisting it on behalf of the landlord constituency.⁴⁹

As an ideology, *nōhonshugi*’s influence in the lives of rural people is difficult to tease apart from the historical precedents it drew upon, such as Confucian morality and rural *hotoku* societies that advocated the frugal, self-sustaining agriculturalism of early modern philosopher Ninomiya Sontoku (1787-1856). Even in today’s Japan it is easy to detect a prominent strain of environmental agrarianism, a belief in the salubrious moral value of farming — Jeffersonian Americans were not exceptional. Additionally, global economic depression and rising international tensions in the 1930s caused governments around the world, irrespective of ideology, to turn their attentions inward and to pursue greater self-sufficiency. As scholar Penelope Francks later wrote about Asian

⁴⁹ Sessaiah, 6-10. For more on *nōhonshugi* see Thomas R. H. Havens, *Farm and Nation in Modern Japan: Agrarian Nationalism, 1870-1940*. Princeton University Press, 1974.

developmental trends during the pre- and post-war periods, “few developing countries could afford not to introduce policies for the promotion of technical change and commercialization in agriculture.” Whether because of the *nōhonshugi* ideology, pragmatic calculations, or both, agricultural matters weighed heavily on the minds of Japanese bureaucrats and military strategists.⁵⁰

An Army policy paper titled “The Essence of National Defense and Proposals for its Reinforcement” called for strengthening farm households in order to produce healthier, stronger soldiers, and the Army followed this up with direct loans to local governments for rural development projects. The military also issued grants to farm cooperatives, which helped farmers market their products, and discharged some peasants’ debts through no-interest government loans.” The Army was also behind 1932, 1933, and 1936 “price stabilization measures. . . to protect the farmers against price fluctuations.” Finally there was the Army’s “most alluring” form of aid: the opening up of “vast lands on the continent” for land-poor farmers, namely in the puppet state of Manchuria which Japan called Manchukuo.⁵¹

Legal action that materially benefited tenants intensified with Japan's war against China after 1937. In 1939 the Shōwa government froze farm rents to help encourage production, and in 1940 it began to issue direct agricultural subsidies to both owners and tenants. Also in 1940, the central government, which needed rice to feed the army, began to collect in-kind rent payments directly from rice-growing tenants, cutting off landlords'

⁵⁰ Penelope Francks, Johanna Boestel, and Choo Hyop Kim. *Agriculture and Economic Development in East Asia: From Growth to Protectionism in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan*. New York: Routledge, 1999, see Chapter 3.

⁵¹ Sessaiah, 9-10.

ability to profit from their land. Some landlords tried to impose a cash rent on their tenants in lieu of the old crop share, or simply ignored the poorly-enforced new rules, but after 1940 many landlords would never again see profits from their holdings.⁵²

In some ways, then, the ownership patterns created by the Meiji reform had been irrevocably altered before Japan and the United States even went to war. Whether the war had been won or not, a postwar reassertion of landlord power may have been difficult — soldiers returning to their villages would have worsened the land shortage that the Army had hoped to alleviate through imperial expansion, and landlords were finding their tenanted farms less and less lucrative. That did not mean that landlords or the politicians they elected would willingly reduce their power even further, but it did mean that another round of reform attempts was probably inevitable, whether native or foreign in origin.

AMERICAN PLANNING

On the first of April 1944, with the American and Japanese armies at each other's throats in the Pacific, a classified U.S. military document titled “Civil Affairs Handbook: Japan” came off the U.S. government presses. The very lengthy handbook provided historical and statistical information on a variety of Japanese socioeconomic topics for the benefit of potential occupation authorities. Section 7 was devoted entirely to the status of Japanese agriculture. That section's author was Wolf Isaac Ladejinsky of the Department of Agriculture's Foreign Agricultural Service.

Between the 1930s and the 1970s, nobody could claim to know more about U.S.

⁵² Voelkner, 20-24; Sessaiah, 11.

land reform policies in Asia than Ladejinsky. His long career took place behind the scenes, except for one infamous incident related in chapter 6, and even in historical accounts he has usually been little more than a footnote. Ladejinsky was instrumental in designing the land reform program that took place in Japan, but was modest about the role he played there, preferring to give credit to General Douglas MacArthur's "strong support" for the program and to the Japanese government's cooperative implementation of it. But during every stage of the process Ladejinsky's ideas "focused the otherwise formless general discussion" on land reform into a concrete plan of action.⁵³

One of Ladejinsky's friends and colleagues from the occupation years remembered him as a "slight, gray-templed. . . pipe-smoker. . . with a soft-spoken, charming, continental manner and intriguing Russian accent." That accent was a source of concern for the "introverted and hypersensitive" Ladejinsky. He predicted, before receiving his assignment to Tokyo, that the U.S. government would "never let me be an American official abroad with my Russian accent and birth. . . . They just wouldn't listen to me there." More than one acquaintance remarked on Ladejinsky's penchant for pessimism, but it was not always misplaced.⁵⁴

Ladejinsky had been born in rural Ukraine in 1899 to a Jewish family with "rather extensive flour-milling and timber interests." His brother was killed and his family's property was confiscated during the Soviet annexation of Ukraine in 1919. After living for a while under communist rule, Ladejinsky "ran across the frozen Dniester River" and

⁵³ Theodore Cohen, *Remaking Japan: The American Occupation as New Deal*, ed. Herbert Passin (New York: Free Press, 1987), 38; Wolf I. Ladejinsky, "Land Reform in Japan: A Comment," in *Land Tenure*, 225.

⁵⁴ Cohen., 37, 39.

crossed into Romania under cover of night, leaving his parents and several sisters behind. Two years later, with, as he remembered, “no money, no friends and not knowing the language,” he immigrated to New York City. He became an American citizen and worked as a window washer, tailor, and newspaper peddler while taking night courses at City College of New York. Ladejinsky soon learned enough English to enroll in a graduate program at Columbia University, which granted him a degree in agricultural economics in 1928. He later received a job with the U.S. Department of Agriculture thanks to the patronage of his former professor Rexford Tugwell, a member of Franklin Roosevelt's “Brain Trust.” He absorbed the writings of “radical Japanese agronomists” Yagi Yoshinosuke, Kawada Shirō, and Nasu Hiroshi, all proponents of tenant rights and land redistribution. In 1944, as American troops slowly advanced toward the Japanese home islands, Ladejinsky coauthored a planning guide for the occupation of Japan that earned him a ticket to Tokyo and a position as special adviser to MacArthur. The “short, intense, scholarly man” with a “weak stomach” and a hatred of communists had become an American land reform expert in the Far East. After designing Japan's land redistribution program he became involved with the reform in Taiwan and, after a political storm centering on his immigrant background, South Vietnam.⁵⁵

Ladejinsky's purpose with his portion of the Civil Affairs Handbook for Japan was to provide digestible agricultural statistics to help guide policymakers in soon-to-be

⁵⁵ Takemae Eiji, *Inside GHQ: The Allied Occupation of Japan and its Legacy* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 340-41; Wolf Ladejinsky, “Self-description/Appraisal,” in *Agrarian Reform as Unfinished Business: The Selected Papers of Wolf Ladejinsky*, ed. Louis J. Walinsky (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 289; Louis J. Walinsky, introduction to *Agrarian Reform as Unfinished Business*, 4; “The Administration: Odd Man Out,” *Time*, January 3, 1955; Cohen, 25.

occupied Tokyo and in Washington. Yet he did editorialize. Despite growing productivity, Japan's "agriculture has not been in a sound economic state for years," he warned readers. "The great extent of tenancy is one of the most troublesome problems of Japan's agricultural economy. It has been one of the main sources of economic distress and internal tension. . . [by] extremist political movements on the part of the Army." Ladejinsky, because of his background, was perhaps more attuned than most of his colleagues to the threat of Soviet incursions and communist land seizures, and he wrote extensively about them elsewhere, but such concerns do not figure prominently in his handbook for occupied Japan. In that document the political enemies of the moment were the Japanese militarists, and Ladejinsky spoke for the most part in economic and technical terms about the challenges that would face the American conquerors of Japan. "Nearly 5.5 million farm households press upon less than 15 million acres of land. This is a basic weakness not only of the country's agriculture, but of its economy in general." Whether the goal of occupiers was to eradicate political extremism or repair the Japanese economy — and both, in turn, were goals of the occupation — a solution suggested by the handbook was to "enable the tenants to become the owners of the land they work."⁵⁶

By April 1945, a year after the Civil Affairs Handbook was completed, planning of a more detailed nature was underway. George McColm, a Navy Reserve lieutenant serving as Agricultural Officer at the Joint Army-Navy Civil Affairs Staging Area (CASA), later recalled that he was "asked to prepare a land reform proclamation to be issued the day we took control of Japan" as well as the broad outlines of a land reform

⁵⁶ Ladejinsky, *Civil Affairs Handbook*, 22, 37, 42, 186.

law “for immediate enactment by the Japanese Diet.” That McColm carried out his assignment with great care for the well-being of Japanese tenant farmers is remarkable in light of the fact that his brother, an army captain who was stationed in the Philippines at the start of the war, had been missing in action since the Japanese invasion of Luzon in December 1941. In drafting the CASA land reform, McColm relied heavily on Ladejinsky's Civil Affairs handbook. The way McColm read it, the handbook called for a policy that would bring about “the emancipation of the Japanese tenant farmers.” His draft land reform law envisioned local land reform committees composed of two landlords, two tenants, and a fifth member of indeterminate status. This basic concept would prove crucial to the success of the eventual Japanese land reform law, though like other portions of McColm's draft it would undergo several changes. Ladejinsky's influence on pre-surrender planning continued when he himself arrived at CASA to educate the staff about Japanese agriculture.⁵⁷

According to McColm, an amateur historian who in later years would later plumb the National Archives and append copious notes to his own documents before donating them to the presidential library system, the Civil Affairs draft law based on the Civil Affairs handbook encountered almost immediate resistance in MacArthur's headquarters from a member of the civil affairs staff. The critic was “Red” Leonard, an agricultural specialist from Colorado State University then working in an advisory capacity in GHQ. “Red” was anything but; McColm quotes Leonard's view that the CASA draft “must have

⁵⁷ George McColm to Clifford Foust, March 24, 1994, McColm Papers box 1, HSTL; George McColm to the friends of Captain Edwin McColm, November 18, 1945, McColm Papers box 1, HSTL.

been written by some pro-communist idiot in Washington — there is no way the landlords will work on a committee to sell their land.” Leonard was so opposed to the notion of radically altering ownership patterns, says McColm, that he took the time to rewrite Ladejinsky's portion of the Civil Affairs handbook “to eliminate all reference to a need for land reform in Japan.” (The original, though, was so widely circulated among occupation planners that it is doubtful many took notice of the redacted version.) Although Ladejinsky's handbook had encouraged a land reform “immediately following” Japan's surrender, and although President Truman had “approved CASA land reform and marked it 'urgent' some time in July 1945,” the responsibility for selecting and carrying out reforms was left largely to the discretion of MacArthur as Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP). The opposition of an adviser like Leonard could therefore have scuttled the reform before it began, were it not for the ongoing efforts of pro-reform advisers and MacArthur’s own belief in the importance land reform.⁵⁸

The push for land reform was reinforced during the occupation's first autumn when Robert Fearey arrived in Japan and began to work with MacArthur's staff to design a land reform policy. Until the war and the severance of diplomatic relations, Fearey had served as Joseph Grew's private secretary while Grew was Ambassador to Japan, and been locked down in Tokyo with the rest of the embassy for the first several months of 1942. During the rest of the war, Fearey's role was to develop postwar policies for Japan

⁵⁸ George McColm to Clifford Foust; George McColm notes to “Obituary: Wolf Ladejinsky,” McColm Papers box 1, HSTL. SWNCC 150, a document that in the words of Steven Schwartzberg “implicitly conferred upon the Occupation” a great deal of discretion in policymaking, explicitly called for “a wide distribution of income and of the ownership of the means of production and trade” in agriculture as well as industry. The document is readily available through the National Diet Library website, among other places: <http://www.ndl.go.jp/constitution/shiryo/01/022/022tx.html> (accessed March 3, 2016).

and the Far East. Before the surrender he had worked closely with Ladejinsky to get agricultural reform on the postwar agenda. Specifically, in the first half of 1945 Fearey and Ladejinsky coauthored two papers at the behest of the State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee (SWNCC) that recommended land redistribution in post-surrender Japan. According to McColm, Fearey's arrival at GHQ saved land reform from Leonard and put it back on the fast track. Ladejinsky arrived a few months after Fearey, in December of 1945.⁵⁹

Fearey would later tell the story from his perspective. He arrived in Tokyo in October, submitted to MacArthur a memo based on his and Ladejinsky's documents, and

[a] day or two later, I was sitting in my office at the Mitsui building when an American colonel burst through the door—"Are you Fearey? You hit the jackpot. The general took your paper home and liked it and asked the Civil Information and Education Section to work on a directive to institute a program for Japanese agrarian reform."

After the Fearey memorandum, progress was rapid. The directive from GHQ to the Japanese government came on December 9, 1945. The timing was not as close on the heels of the formal September surrender as Ladejinsky and McColm had hoped, but the tone of the order was more dramatic — more MacArthurian — than anything either of those intellectual civil servants would have written. The directive instructed the Japanese government to take action to "destroy the economic bondage which has enslaved the Japanese farmer to centuries of feudal oppression" and "to exterminate those pernicious ills which have long blighted the agrarian structure" of the nation, tenancy among them.

⁵⁹ Steven Schwartzberg, "Wolf Ladejinsky, the Japan Hands and the Political Background of the Japanese Land Reform," October 26, 1990, McColm Papers box 1, HSTL, 24-26; McColm to Foust, March 24, 1994; Dore, 131.

The pronouncement set a four-month deadline for the development of a land redistribution policy.⁶⁰

In fact, the Japanese cabinet had acted faster than MacArthur's headquarters. Just two weeks after the surrender, General Prince Higashikuni of the Japanese army and imperial household, then in the midst of a 54-day stint as prime minister, said that breaking up large farms could help alleviate a food shortage that was expected to worsen as soldiers and Japanese residents of Manchuria, Korea, and Taiwan repatriated. In late November Higashikuni's successor, Kijuro Shidehara, a pacifist and a baron of the soon-to-be-dismantled peerage, had directed one of his Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry staffers, Hirō Wada, to design a plan for the redistribution of some farmland.⁶¹

LAND REFORM IN THE DIET

During the war, Wada's class-based advocacy of land reform had landed him in prison. A socialist (he later became a high-ranking member of Japan's Socialist party) and a vocal proponent of land redistribution, Wada stood out even in the relatively liberal Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, which for decades had had a reputation for advocating on behalf of tenants and independent farmers. Many of Wada's superiors became advocates of land reform in the aftermath of war in the hopes of preempting a stronger program from MacArthur's military government, and Wada himself rejoined the bureaucracy with a mandate to write a land reform bill. The bill that became known as

⁶⁰ Laurence Hewes, "The Japanese Land Reform Program—Its Significance to Rural Asia," February 16-17, 1950, John Sumner Papers (hereafter Sumner Papers) box 7, HSTL; Schwartzberg, "Wolf Ladejinsky, the Japan Hands and the Political Background of the Japanese Land Reform," 9, 24.

⁶¹ Sessaiah, 12.

“the Wada bill,” however, was a compromise between Wada’s principles and a grudging recognition by the Cabinet that something, preferably as little as possible, had to be done about land inequity. “The Wada bill” was well short of Wada’s preferred land reform.⁶²

Wada’s proposal was to eliminate absentee landlordism entirely, but to allow resident landlords to retain up to three chō of farmland, a sizable amount by Japanese standards. At most 1.3 million chō from 1 million landlords could have been redistributed under these terms. The bill provided for local agricultural committees comprised of equal numbers of landlords and tenants to oversee the redistribution. Though more conservative than the bill the Americans eventually put forth, the Shidehara government had wanted something even less radical from Wada. The Shidehara Cabinet therefore amended Wada’s proposal by raising the retention limit to five chō, which would have allowed for the redistribution of just 900,000 chō from 100,000 landlords. Even this drastically weakened version of the Wada plan was likely to face fierce resistance as a bill in the pro-landlord Diet, which would have to pass it into law.⁶³

The Diet was split between a coalition of the Shimpotō (“Progressive”) and Jiyūtō (“Liberal”) parties on the one hand, and a Shakaitō (“Socialist”) faction on the other. For the sake of appearances, the more pro-landlord parties, the Jiyūtō and the Shimpotō, could not openly admit their opposition to the bill. Before 1945 they had unapologetically defended landlords’ property rights — some Diet members actually were absentee

⁶² Dore, 104-5.

⁶³ Shinrokuro Yamaguchi, *Some Aspects of Agrarian Reform in Japan* (Tokyo: The Japan Institute of Pacific Studies, 1948), 4; Shen Shun Fun, “日本における農地改革：日本政府とGHQの折衝を中心に,” *The Review of Legal and Political Sciences* 34 (May 15, 1998), 147; Seshaiyah, 12; Dore, 141-45; Schwartzberg, “Wolf Ladejinsky, the Japan Hands and the Political Background of the Japanese Land Reform,” 11.

landlords or were the sons of landlords — but the occupation changed the political calculus: the Americans were promoting wider voter participation and demanding action on land tenure. Also, the press had taken up the issue of land reform as early as the Higashikuni statement, and newspapers generally supported the idea. The effect of such pressure, Dore says, was that within the Diet “[i]t was now as impossible to stand up in the Diet and declare oneself as against democracy and in favour of feudalism as it had been two years before [during the war] to say a good word for ‘individualism’ or ‘liberalism.’” As anti-reform parties bent to popular and American pressure, Socialists in the Diet tried to seize the moment by modifying the Cabinet’s bill with addendums lowering the retention limit. This, however, made the bill’s passage less likely; anti-reform parties still drew the line at a thoroughgoing redistribution and were determined to pass only a weak bill into law. The Diet was at a stalemate when MacArthur issued his December 9 edict.⁶⁴

GHQ's decision to give a fractured Japanese government a chance to pass a law, even though McColm's own draft was already written and Ladejinsky was working up a more detailed version, requires some explanation. Laurence Hewes, a civilian land reform specialist in GHQ, provided the official line in a 1950 address to the National Farm Institute. It was disingenuous, or willfully ignorant, when Hewes claimed in his speech that occupation authorities were “prepared to see the issue voluntarily carried out through Japanese law and Japanese administration after a democratic referendum”; the U.S. had

⁶⁴ Ann Waswo, *Japanese Landlords: The Decline of a Rural Elite* (University of California Press, 1977), 85-86; Yamaguchi, 5; Sessaiah, 12-13; Dore, 146.

no intention of leaving the decision to reform, or even how to reform, up to the Japanese government or the Japanese people. Yet aside from his use of the word “voluntarily,” Hewes was correct that GHQ desired to leave the execution of the reform to the Japanese government. As Hewes stated, “formulating major policies” was the task of GHQ staff, whereas the task of the Japanese government was “legislation, administration, adjudication and enforcement” of those policies. This delegation of responsibility would, in theory, enhance the legitimacy of occupation policies and encourage their long-term success by making them appear to derive at least in part from domestic sources (which, in a limited way, was true.) Fearey later indicated that the purpose of the early American-authored drafts was to provide baselines by which GHQ could judge Japanese versions. Therefore the Japanese government was asked to produce a land reform policy even though GHQ had a couple of its own in reserve. This was, in fact, the usual GHQ methodology; the Diet had also been instructed, for example, to craft a new Constitution, but GHQ rejected its drafts and its own staffers wrote the final document.⁶⁵

It was paradoxical, inasmuch that it contradicted his attempts to credit the Japanese government for the program, that Hewes told the National Farm Institute that the American government should seek greater publicity for its role in Japanese land reform. “We should capitalize on this achievement among the peoples of Asia more broadly perhaps than we have,” he said, and “much more loudly!” In particular, Hewes wanted to stress to the Asian peasantry that land reform could take place in a way that

⁶⁵ Seshiah, 11, 26-27. The literature on the Japanese Constitution is very extensive. See, for starters, Osamu Nishi, *Ten Days Inside General Headquarters (GHQ): How the Original Draft of the Japanese Constitution was Written in 1946* (Tokyo: Seibundo, 1989).

preserved “the harmony of democratic beliefs” and expanded, rather than eroded, private property rights; in other words, he wanted to use Japan's experience to show that agrarian reform was not the exclusive purview of communists. Perhaps, then, the desire to operate indirectly had been a way to deflect blame in the case of failure. Since by 1950 the success of the Japanese program seemed more or less certain, Hewes saw more for the U.S. government to gain than to lose by taking credit.⁶⁶

In the same speech, and in further contradiction to his attempt to attribute the policy to the Japanese government, Hewes repeatedly credited MacArthur for bringing about land reform in Japan. In this he was joined by both Ladejinsky and McColm, who for the rest of their lives gave a great deal of credit to the General for his role in promoting the program. “I should like to state here that this wise policy must be credited particularly to General MacArthur,” Hewes said in 1950. McColm, who over the subsequent decades wrote much in praise of Ladejinsky and expressed some pride in his own role in shaping the program, thought that it might not have happened had MacArthur not “decided to push land reform as a key part of his economic program.” Ladejinsky, who at times described the land reform as “a Japanese idea,” (and indeed it had substantial Japanese support and some precedent in the prewar period) also saw as essential MacArthur's strong support for it. Ladejinsky went so far as to try to trace the reasons for the general's interest in the matter. He found explanations in MacArthur's youthful study of ancient Roman reforms, and in MacArthur's father's frustrated efforts to

⁶⁶ Hewes; Sessaiah, 11, 26-27.

bring about land reform in the occupied Philippines at the turn of the century.⁶⁷

MacArthur spoke on more than one occasion about the “Gracchi” reforms of two millennia earlier. Remembering the land reform in May 1951, he delivered a typically grandiose statement to the U.S. Senate:

I don't think that since the Gracchi effort at land reform in the days of the Roman Empire there has been anything quite as successful of that nature that has been not only to improve the food production but. . . to establish a political segment of society which before was nervous, irritable, exploitable, into one of the most sound conservative elements of the political life in Japan.

No doubt the general hoped to draw favorable attention to his record in Japan as he contemplated a run for the presidency. Yet MacArthur was a genuine antiquarian, and the old Roman story was likely an evocative source of inspiration to him as he tried to achieve something he considered of great and lasting importance. The Gracchi brothers, whose exploits are recorded by the Greek historian Plutarch, proposed the redistribution of public lands to the poor. Plutarch's Caius was a “demagogue” and a populist, but was murdered by his political enemies in the Senate. It would have been very much in the style of MacArthur, who had a famously melodramatic and grandiose disposition and who often felt persecuted by Washington politicians like President Truman, if he had imagined himself as a new Caius Gracchus.⁶⁸

With MacArthur and his staff awaiting action from the Japanese government, the Diet finally passed “the Wada bill,” which no longer bore any similarity to what Wada

⁶⁷ Hewes; Sessaiah, 26-27; McColm to Foust, March 24, 1994; Schwartzberg, “Wolf Ladejinsky, the Japan Hands and the Political Background of the Japanese Land Reform,” 1.

⁶⁸ Plutarch, “Caius Gracchus,” trans. John Dryden, accessed March 28, 2014, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plutarch/gracchus.html>; McCoy, 23; Dore, 132. The best character study of MacArthur is William Manchester's biography *American Caesar* (1983), which also gives this quotation and whose title echoes the classicism and bombast of the “blue-eyed shogun.”

originally wrote. The passage came well in advance of GHQ's four-month deadline — just weeks, in fact, after MacArthur's December 9 edict. That order from SCAP had prompted the legislators to act on the Cabinet's watered-down version of the Wada bill, and the two pro-landlord parties weakened it even further over the objections of the Socialist party. The resulting bill, passed on December 21, 1945, set a maximum ownership limit of five chō for “non-operating landlords.” Landlords who farmed any land themselves were therefore to be entirely exempt from redistribution. Eighteen-member local agricultural committees, of which tenant farmers would comprise less than a third, would oversee the purchase and resale of the non-operating landlords' excess acreage.⁶⁹

Japanese progressives voiced their disapproval of the law, as did Japanese newspapers. The Japanese Farmers' Union staged a protest rally. The five chō retention limit and the reliance on local committees that would be “strongly coloured by landocratic and bureaucratic influences” prompted one critic to dismiss the law as “a product of compromises.” Another went further, calling it “extremely reactionary.” There was much confusion over whether the law allowed landlords to split the ownership of their land among their family members in order to maintain all their holdings — Dore believes it did. Also, it did not escape the notice of the law's detractors that landlords could enforce rent payments in kind instead of cash, a system that had caused problems for tenants during times of low prices. GHQ promptly vetoed the Diet's law, apparently

⁶⁹ Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (hereafter SCAP), *Summary of Non-Military Activities in Japan and Korea* no. 3, December 1945, SCAP Summation Reports box 1, HSTL, 48-49; Dore, 132-37.

on the advice of Ladejinsky, who was then writing the land reform draft that GHQ would submit to the Diet as a replacement.⁷⁰

ENSURING A STRONG REFORM

Over the next several months, the question of resident landlords' hectare retention limit was the subject of discussion between GHQ and a collaborative but mostly ineffective body of Soviet, English, Nationalist Chinese, American observers called the Allied Council for Japan. According to scholar Shen Shun Fen, a consensus formed within GHQ around a three-hectare limit. In March, April, and May, GHQ issued no less than three statements to the Japanese government with instructions that the retention limit should be no higher than three hectares. The land reform bill that Ladejinsky wrote for GHQ was also "quietly presented to the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture in May 1946." At this stage, however, the Allied Council for Japan became involved. George Atcheson, the American representative and chairman of the council, had summarized the Diet's law rather succinctly in comments to the Japanese press: the "Government-proposed land reform measures were a step in the right direction but only a step or two." It was the British and Soviet representatives who seemed determined to take the next steps. The British representative, W. MacMahon Ball, made a number of suggestions about what a proper law should, at a minimum, provide, including a limit of just one hectare for resident landlords. This figure would raise the amount of tenanted land subject to redistribution from less than 44% to nearly 70%. By contrast, the Soviet representative

⁷⁰ Dore, 135-36; Yamaguchi, 7.

and the Communist Party of Japan advocated the confiscation of all tenanted land.⁷¹

Although GHQ had generally ignored the work of the Allied Council for Japan in favor of a unilaterally American-style occupation, in the case of land reform MacArthur actually took an interest in their discussions. At a June 26th meeting to discuss the council's proposals, MacArthur “surprisingly” adopted the British proposal for a one-hectare limitation, praising it as a valuable and constructive addition to the land reform program. This action has puzzled some chroniclers, including Shen Shun Fen, who in the absence of conclusive documentation have put forth various explanations as to why MacArthur embraced the stronger British proposal over the more modest consensus of GHQ. Shen suggests that MacArthur himself may have asked Ball to introduce the one hectare limit, and Dore supports this by saying that Ball made his proposal only after “some consultation with Occupation officials.” By making the Allied Council the source of the proposal, Shen says, criticism from the Council’s Soviet delegate could be preempted or at least minimized. Had GHQ presented the one-hectare alternative, the Soviet delegate might have rallied Japan’s communists around a zero-hectare limit. While persuasive as far as it goes, Shen's explanation does not explain why GHQ used the Allied Council in this way only on the issue of land reform and not for other issues. An alternative explanation is the idea that MacArthur was passionately invested in a dramatic land reform program due to his father's experiences in the Philippines, his desire to equal the epic heroes of Plutarch, and his wish to establish a reputation as an effective and popular political leader in preparation for a possible presidential campaign. In any event,

⁷¹ Dore, 135-37; Yamaguchi, 9; Shen, 148; McCoy, 17.

the Russian delegate did support the British delegate's one-hectare proposal, as did GHQ.⁷²

The Diet's next land reform bill conceded to all GHQ requests and became the law of the land. Passed on October 21, 1946, the land reform law consisted of two bills that set the amount of land households — not individuals; both the Japanese government and the American reformers saw the family as the fundamental unit of agriculture — could retain an average of about three chō outside of Hokkaido, though exact amounts varied according to area. This changed formula more than doubled the amount of land subject to redistribution. They also specified that the maximum acreage applied to entire landlord households and not merely individual landowners, thereby closing off the potential loophole by which families could divvy up their land among their own members. The number of tenants spots on local land reform boards increased to five, with three spots for landlords and two for independent owner-operators. Purchasers of land had 30 years to pay it off at low interest. Contemporary observers recognized the new law as following the Allied Council for Japan's recommendations, and indeed it did incorporate the suggestions of that body, but in essentials the plan passed by the Diet was one Ladejinsky had written and GHQ had given to the Diet, and it bore Ladejinsky's "revolutionary" hallmarks of low retention limits for landlords, anti-absenteeism, and local land committees "at least half of whose members should be tenant farmers." In April 1952, two days before the San Francisco Treaty of 1951 took effect and ended the

⁷² Shen, 148-49; Dore, 137. W. MacMahon Ball, *Japan: Enemy or Ally?* (New York: John Day Company, 1949), 119. Ball's autobiographical account of his stint on the Allied Council for Japan does not reveal any conspiratorial dimension to the land reform story, but for those interested in the Allied Council it is a useful text.

occupation, Minister of Agriculture Kozen Horikawa gave Ladejinsky a silver plaque stating that “the Land Reform will remain forever and so will your name in Japanese agriculture.” Ladejinsky’s assistance was afterward requested either directly or through government channels by Taiwan’s Chen Cheng, Iran’s Mohammed Reza Shah, and U.S. ambassadors around Asia.⁷³

LOCAL COMMITTEES AND THE CASE OF TŌHOKU

Criticism from committed reformers did not abate with the passage of the Diet’s new bill. Many noticed that non-cultivating landlords, if they were resident owners rather than absentee, could retain one chō of tenanted land. Yamaguchi believed that the “thoroughgoing abolition of various feudal relations and conventions” was impossible if small non-operating landlords were allowed to persist. He offered the dire prediction that “the continued existence of one-chō landowners would eventually be made the basis on which an elaborate landocratic land possession system would be built up” and could even leave the door open to a “reactionary offensive of [the] landlord class as a whole.” That one chō of permissible tenanted land also worried Dore, who identified it as the most serious shortcoming of the reform, but for a different reason. He pointed out that it prevented those who were landlords in name only from cultivating their one-chō plots themselves if their tenants decided it was in their interest to continue renting the land — a strange reversal of roles that Dore discusses at length before concluding that villages

⁷³ Dore, 137-38; Yamaguchi, 10-12; McCoy, 17-18; Walinsky, 11, 20; Iwamoto, 224.

were slowly working the problem out on their own.⁷⁴

In 1948 Yamaguchi wrote pessimistically that “the program has not actually aroused as passionate an enthusiasm of the peasant masses themselves. . . as it deserves.” He bemoaned a lack “of political and social consciousness” among the peasantry, and as evidence cited the December elections of local land reform committees. Out of 11,205 land commissions in the country, 5,065 or 45.2% did not involve contested elections between different candidates for the positions. Yamaguchi attributed the number of uncontested elections to a “general lack of enthusiasm and liveliness” among the rural population. In some villages, consensus may have formed around certain candidates prior to elections. In the worst cases, village notables may have handpicked their preferred committee members or otherwise made voting seem too great a risk for peasants, as evidenced by an average 30% abstention rate in contested elections. Yet these numbers do not necessarily equate to a lack of interest among poor farmers in the land reform program itself, and they certainly did not mean that the committees could avoid carrying out a redistribution of land.⁷⁵

Among the Japanese-language materials sent to communities in advance of the December 1946 vote was a large-font, heavily-illustrated pamphlet explaining how the land commission voting process would work. Any man or woman twenty years of age or older whose household farmed at least one tan of land could vote (a tan is one tenth of a chō, .09917 hectares or 0.2451 acres.) People who met these qualifications could also

⁷⁴ Yamaguchi, 11; Dore, 188-94.

⁷⁵ Yamaguchi, 1, 15-16.

run for one of the ten committee positions by registering with their city or village government. Pictures and bold text showed that each tenant voter would vote for the five tenant spots, independent farmers for their two spots, and landlords for the remaining three spots. The pamphlet defined a tenant household as one that borrowed at least half of the land they farmed, and a landlord household as one that rented out at least half of the land they owned. All other households were to be considered independent owner-operators. A highlighted block of text admonished voters not to compromise their votes in response to monetary or social pressures. The Japanese press and the occupation authorities watched voting results and asked about farmers' satisfaction with the committees, but in the end "a great deal was left to the discretion of local Land Committees, and whether the law was applied with conscientious thoroughness. . . depended chiefly" on their makeup.⁷⁶

In focusing on the provisions of laws to explain the success or failure of land reform programs, historians have perhaps attached too little importance to the existence of local land reform committees. Later, even strong laws, such as South Vietnam's Land to the Tiller Law, could fail in the absence of active peasant participation. South Korea's reform featured local committees, but the outbreak of war delayed their formation, and thus delayed reform. Japan's strong reform and Taiwan's slightly more conservative reform, both hailed by observers and later scholars as successes, were carried out by committees on which land recipients themselves were strongly represented. "By

⁷⁶ Japanese-language pamphlet dated 十二月二十日, Microfilm Section 3-402/NNDG No. 775017, National Diet Library, Japan; "Land Reform Investigation Status Report," February 19, 1947, Microfilm Section 3-402/NNDG No. 775017, National Diet Library, Japan; Dore, 150.

providing the reform beneficiaries with important roles in the process of implementation,” said a historian of Taiwan's reform, “these committees have been most effective in dispelling peasant indifference and in curbing the landlords' evasive and resistant tactics.” The same may be said of Japan, and the relative weakness of committees in the case of Korea and South Vietnam are surely major factors in their more troubled experiences with land reform.⁷⁷

Once elected, local committees did most of the work of land reform. Their members “determined which land, up to the one hectare, a landlord was to retain” and “which lands were to be sold to which tenants.” Local committees were the first arbiters of disputes, but prefectural committees of 25 members and a central committee of 23 members also existed to provide guidance and ensure that local committees discharged their duties. Tenants had a plurality on the prefectural committees, with ten members compared to landlords' six, owner-operators' four, and neutral observers' five, but the central committee had an equal number of tenants and landlords at eight seats each plus two peasant union members and five university professor members. Local committee members elected the prefectural committee members, who in turn approved the actions of the local committees in their jurisdictions, and the central government simply appointed the top-level central committee members. Thus, only the local committees were strictly democratic.⁷⁸

The nature of the local land commission elections varied according to local and

⁷⁷ Hung-chao Tai, *Land Reform and Politics: A Comparative Analysis* (University of California Press, 1974), 401-2.

⁷⁸ Voelkner, 40.

regional conditions. Tōhoku, the northeastern portion of Japan that encompasses several of the country's largest and most agrarian prefectures, stood out to contemporary observers as an important case study. As Yamaguchi put it, the peasants of Tōhoku “had particularly suffered for a long time from feudal yoke.” They had few tenant unions, and the region had been relatively calm during periods of frequent tenancy disputes in the rest of Japan. Ann Waswo has noted that this region had few cities and industrial concerns to entice landlords and their money away from agriculture, or to draw farmers away from farming, so the two classes were particularly dependent on each other and not apt to be openly combative. Yet it was not hard to find instances of resentment. An investigator sent by GHQ to northerly Iwate prefecture interviewed a landlord named Terui. Terui rented out one chō of land and farmed an additional 8 tan himself. When asked if he thought the commissioners elected in his village would properly represent him, he criticized one, a tenant commissioner who “does not have enough education to properly represent the people.” Terui was not happy about the land reform or about all of the people in charge of executing it, but he was at least informed. He had attended meetings, read newspaper articles, and listened to radio reports about the law.⁷⁹

The daily newspaper Asahi Shimbun reported that in eastern Japan, including Tōhoku, land commission election results were “discouraging” because local officials and agricultural organizations “lacked enthusiasm in enlightening and guiding the peasants about the election of land commissions.” However, the voter data that Yamaguchi

⁷⁹ Waswo, *Japanese Landlords*, 130; Waswo, “Japanese Tenant Unions,” 8; Yamaguchi, 17-20; “Land Reform Investigation Status Report,” February 19, 1947.

compiled from elections throughout Tōhoku told a different story. He found that while nearly half of landlords elected to local committees had run unopposed, “the tenant class has shown the keenest interest in the elections,” with only about 27% of tenant positions on commissions being uncontested and a below-average 23.3% abstention rate among landless voters.⁸⁰

Yamaguchi credited the relatively robust tenant participation in Tōhoku elections to the educational efforts of local farmer's unions. A Tōhoku prefecture, Yamagata, was one of only three prefectures in Japan in which there were more tenant chairmen of local land commissions than landlord or independent owner-operator chairmen. Tōhoku seems to have been marked by a somewhat higher degree of both landlord and peasant participation in the committees compared to other parts of Japan, perhaps simply due to the rarity of the third category, owner-operators. The landowning pattern in the region — comparatively large estates requiring much tenant labor, and little opportunity for outside employment that might help a tenant family purchase their own land — meant that the agricultural population tended to polarize into the two classes of landlords and tenants, strengthening both groups' likelihood of chairing commission.⁸¹

The easiest way for landlords to minimize their losses in the looming redistribution was to recoup leased land before the reform could take effect. Land commissions played a decisive role in counteracting this tactic. The National Federation of Agricultural Associations and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry collected data

⁸⁰ Yamaguchi, 17-20.

⁸¹ Yamaguchi, 20-21; “Land Reform Investigation Status Report,” February 19, 1947.

on attempted land seizures by landlords and estimated that 250,000 landlords had seized land from tenants. Some of these instances involved farmers who went off to war or whose sons did so, and leased the land they could not work “on the promise that it would be returned as soon as the men were demobilized.” Many such agreements were informal and the cases were probably not disputed, but 23,000 evictions were disputed between the end of the war and mid-1946. These mostly concerned very small amounts of land, just 3 tan on average outside of Hokkaido. Large or absentee landlords, the principle targets of the land reform program, were less likely to attempt to reclaim tiny plots of land than “moderate or small landlords” who resided near their land. Every dispute had to be considered on a case-by-case basis, so the land reform law empowered the local land committees to approve or overturn disputed land transfers that had taken place before the law went into effect. Tenants recouped 16,000 chō of land they had lost between the surrender and the land reform law, and Dore considers authority over convictions to have been “the touchstone of a Land Committee’s efficiency.”⁸²

The heavy responsibilities of local land committees in implementing and adjudicating land redistribution suggests that while American policymakers may justly take credit for the existence and the nature of the reform, it was at the village level that the reform was implemented and enforced.

⁸² Dore, 152-53; Yamaguchi, 25-28. Yamaguchi is an excellent source of official Ministry of Agriculture statistics on landlord-tenant disputes at the time of the land reform. Dore, on pages 153-55, tells the story of one particular Tōhoku village whose committee had to be reelected after irregularities were discovered.

MONITORING THE PROGRAM

In 1947 GHQ asked Arthur Raper to oversee a large survey of agricultural families in Japan. Raper's research on tenure challenges in the United States was discussed in the introduction to this study; he was a firm believer in the value of small, independent farms, and became involved in several land redistribution efforts in Asia. Raper designed a written questionnaire, translated into Japanese by GHQ, that began by asking farm families to identify themselves as tenants, independent cultivators, cultivating landlords, or non-cultivating landlords. Japanese demographic data was readily and more reliably available elsewhere, but the purpose of Raper's questionnaire was not to gather facts. Rather, the purpose of Raper's surveys was to discover how farm families of different sizes and means actually felt about their situations as the land reform took effect. The Raper study recognized that strictly objective data about the amount of land under tenancy could not be the only benchmark for the success of the program. If the object of land reform was to improve living conditions for the peasantry, its success depended to a great extent on its perceived effectiveness.

A family of seven in Oita prefecture in Japan's far southwest responded to the questionnaire in June 1947. They were tenants who reported cultivating a little over one chō of land, all of it rented and almost all of it paddy land. When asked to compare their present situation with their situation of a year earlier, the 27-year-old male head of household answered that the family was worse off now than before. His foremost concerns revolved around his children and the future of his land. Ideally, he wanted a son to continue to farm his borrowed land, as it was too small to divide among more than one

heir. As yet, though, he had only daughters. While having very modest holdings and an uncertain future for them, he seems to have taken an active interest in local affairs. He reported that he frequently visited his town's local cooperative and strongly trusted its staff. He said that he subscribed to a newspaper and sometimes listened to news on a radio, but that his family did not own a radio themselves. The questionnaire contained highly-charged political questions, as when it asked respondents to identify which parties they had voted for and intended to vote for in elections for the lower house of the Diet. The young tenant farmer in Oita reported that he had voted previously and would vote again, but he claimed not to know which party he had supported in the past or which one he would vote for in the future. This fairly informed, politically-engaged, land-poor tenant farmer whose loyalty might be won was exactly the kind of person reformers hoped to assist.⁸³

Not far from this tenant household, a family of eight classified themselves as independent owner-farmers. They had over twice the acreage of their tenant neighbors, two and a half chō of mostly paddy land, all under the name of the 33-year-old male survey respondent. Unlike the tenants, who felt less optimistic in the summer of 1947 than they had in the summer of 1946, this family reported that their outlook was about the same. They reported that their number one problem was clothing. With four men and boys and four women and girls of widely separated ages under the same roof, maintaining and acquiring new clothing must have been a difficult task even for this

⁸³ Arthur Raper, "Raper Study No. 12," June 1947, GHQ/SCAP Records, Microfilm Section 3-402/NNDG No. 775017, National Diet Library, Japan.

family in the middle of the farm ownership hierarchy. On survey questions asking respondents to compare their situation to that of their neighbors, this small-time owner thought local conditions were generally equitable, whereas the tenant family had given a mixed response that suggested a degree of perceived inequality. Land reform would not directly affect this small-holder household, but their responses to the survey were nevertheless carefully reviewed and tabulated for Raper's report. Reformers hoped to make nearly every farmer in Japan an independent farmer of more or less of this size, so an awareness of the needs and attitudes of such families was essential to tracking the land reform's success.⁸⁴

In their zeal for data of this kind, Raper and other GHQ investigators cast a wide net. Local land commissioners around Japan submitted forms with biographical data about farmers in their jurisdiction. In February 1947, in Hyogo prefecture in the western part of Japan's main island, a 39-year-old tenant farmer and four other members of his household were listed as working just over 2 tan of land, a remarkably small amount for a family in which agriculture was the only reported source of income. The head of household had recently spent six months in military service, and he and his wife were now caring for his unemployed mother and two school-aged youths. Two of his neighbors, also tenants, had similarly-sized families but worked about one chō apiece, five times as much land. Each of them rented their paddies from owners who sat on their town's land commission. The importance of this data was clear: knowing that tenants within a single community, though all land-poor from a broader national perspective,

⁸⁴ "Raper Study."

could have substantially different amounts of land under cultivation, and knowing which of these tenants had potentially favorable connections with members of the land commission, could help to ensure that the gains of redistribution did not accrue only to the most well-off and well-connected tenants.⁸⁵

In early 1947, Captain Jerrol Lowe of GHQ and an interpreter visited Japan's northeastern Iwate prefecture, a rice-producing region with particularly large farms and a comparatively high rate of tenancy. Captain Lowe's assignment was to "evaluate the election of Land Commissioners from the standpoint of democratic action," "ascertain general community interest and attitude toward the Land Reform Program," and to determine "the degree of understanding possessed by farmers of all classes" about the program. He interviewed U.S. Army personnel in Iwate's military government, officials in prefectural and village government, and farmers. On the completion of his tour Lowe submitted to his superiors no less than seven reports on conditions in Iwate. His conclusions showed a sophisticated understanding of economic realities, as he spoke frankly about the existence of a black market for agricultural goods and its potential ramifications for the land reform. Moreover, Lowe was unsparing in his criticisms of American military overseers.⁸⁶

Lowe found that American administrators "were not able to give much information" about the elections that had taken place in December 1946 to fill Iwate's local land commission boards. A man named Sonderguard who carried the rank of

⁸⁵ 5250th Technical Intelligence Company, "Land Reform Investigation Personal Interview Report: Iwate," February 1947-March 1947, Microfilm Section 3-402/NNDG No. 775017, National Diet Library, Japan.

⁸⁶ 5250th Technical Intelligence Company.

private was “the only one working on the program” in the prefecture's U.S. Army headquarters. Worse, Lowe reported that “the Military Government Team lost its copy of the law,” and what little Sonderguard knew about land reform he had “picked up. . . from the directives issued by SCAP to the Japanese government.” Lowe had to report to GHQ that the Iwate branch of the military government was “not giving detailed attention to the Land Reform Program.”⁸⁷

Iwate's Japanese government, on the other hand, struck Lowe as energetic and effective. Local officials “are doing a good job and the Military Government depends on them for reports,” he wrote. At the prefectural land office not far from the U.S. Army headquarters, three Japanese staff members gave Lowe detailed information on Iwate's 230 land commissions. Almost all of these commissions had been filled democratically, with votes taking place in the presence of two witnesses and counted by five-man committees. Every locality in which voting took place had been provided with “approximately fifteen posters advertising the election,” and seventy “trained speakers” had gone out from the prefectural capital to explain the process to local officials and farmers' unions. Lowe was impressed with the Japanese government's level of interest in the land reform, remarking that they had even organized “study sessions. . . in order to better understand the program.” The officials he spoke with “were able to answer all questions asked of them,” he reported. If the land reform program was effective because it was *not* designed by Japanese administrators, it seemed to be working smoothly

⁸⁷ 5250th Technical Intelligence Company.

because it was implemented by them.⁸⁸

Wolf Ladejinsky must have made the same observation during his frequent field trips to the countryside and from his attaché position in Tokyo, a spot he held through the end of the occupation and beyond. The land reforms he subsequently wrote, co-wrote, or advocated in other Asian countries each attempted to create local infrastructures for the management of redistribution. When those failed to materialize in South Vietnam, the overall program failed too. In Taiwan, local boards were pervasive and the program succeeded. Yet, as we shall see, other variables in each country complicate the picture and suggest that local responsibility alone was no guarantee of a successful redistribution. A strong central authority, too, seems to have been essential. In the case of Japan, GHQ exercised that strength through family- and village-level monitoring of the program it had designed.

CRITIQUING THE REFORM

In rural Japan today, even the children and grandchildren of landlords tend to remember the land reform as a necessary measure. Baba Hiroyuki's uncle was the head of the Baba family in Futamata village near Ishinomaki city in the Tōhoku region. He held about 8 hectares in this relatively land-poor coastal area, and the family had neither expanded nor contracted its holdings over the previous few decades. The Baba land was fragmented, spread out over several kilometers, and most of it was given over to rice cultivation. Seven of the eight hectares were worked by the Baba family's tenants, with

⁸⁸ 5250th Technical Intelligence Company.

about one tenant family per hectare at any given time, and the final hectare was farmed by the Baba family.

According to Hiroyuki, relations between landlords and tenants were peaceful in the Baba family's village. Tenants were carefully chosen so that the Baba family "could ask their tenants to return some of their lands" in times of need. There are no records of legal conflicts with tenants, nor any memory of disputes in the Baba family tradition. Hiroyuki contrasts this with stories from the neighboring village of Kanan, where a large landlord family named Saitō owned nearly a thousand acres throughout the region and "managed their tenants just like... an incorporated" agrobusiness. Tenants' revolts, *kosakunin sōdo*, were said to be common on Saitō land.

Though the Baba family fortune had originally been made in rice vinegar production early in the Tokugawa period, by the 20th century most of their revenue came from their landholdings. Baba family members also had high positions in local community organizations that helped to carry out weddings, funerals, and cultural events like tea ceremonies, but these were of course unpaid occupations. Hiroyuki believes that the Baba tenants paid about 40% of their rice yield as rent, and that this figure was unchanged for several decades prior to the land reform. Even without rental income, rice-growing was profitable enough that Hiroyuki's father hoped to do it for a living; he went to war, but intended to come back and reclaim one or two hectares from tenants in order to support his own family as a small-scale owner-operator.

The land reform put an end to that dream. Because the law disallowed absentee ownership, the only land the Baba family could retain was that which lay within the

boundaries of Futamata village where they resided. Hiroyuki's uncle, as head of the family, reclaimed the single hectare that Baba tenants had been farming in Futamata. The outlying land that Hiroyuki's father had wanted to reclaim was now off-limits to the family, and was turned over to its tenants in accordance with the land reform law. Later in life Hiroyuki's father would occasionally criticize the land reform in private, but due to the Baba family's high position in the community and desire to maintain good relations "they could not complain about land reform formally."

In any case, farming soon became far less attractive than other occupations, and the Baba family went into new occupations. As late as 1952, a hectare of land could produce enough rice to earn its cultivator a living equivalent to a college graduate's starting salary of 3000 yen. By 1960, though, the relative value of rice was down and the earning power of a college graduate was up to 160,000 yen. Hiroyuki's uncle, the one who laid claim to the single hectare in Futamata village, became a junior high school principle and "had no problem economically." His father, Hiroyuki's grandfather, had also been involved in local school administration. Hiroyuki's father, though, struggled with a variety of occupations including livestock raising and charcoal producing but "never got out of poverty." Of his six children, financial constraints meant that only Hiroyuki went to college. Yet the younger members of the Baba family expressed strong support for the land reform, with some of them joining Japan's Socialist party. Hiroyuki, his siblings, and his cousin (the son of his relatively well-off uncle) are all "convinced of

the role of land reform [in] democratizing” Futamata village and Japan.⁸⁹

The Baba family’s anecdotal experience stands for many in Japan. One member lost land he had been renting out, another member worked a small plot himself as an owner-operator, and most of the family remembered land reform as a necessary, if not personally beneficial, event in modern Japanese history. Like Hiroyuki’s uncle, many ex-landlords adapted quickly to new circumstances due to their strong positions in their communities. Many independent farmers like Hiroyuki’s father (whether they had previously been landlords or tenants) faced limited economic options despite their ownership of small fields. In the Tōhoku region, where industrial development was modest, small landlords could clearly discern the effects of the land reform program on their livelihoods and earning potential. The land reform was successful in breaking up even small tenanted plots, but the even smaller plots that were created were too small to be appealing sources of income. Some rural people could find alternative sources of income and some could not, but the next generation of children had less incentive than ever to remain in agriculture. Land reform hastened the decline of agriculture as a means of earning a living in Japan.

American reformers hoped to eradicate tenancy in Japan and to unleash the democratic and entrepreneurial energies of farmers. Supporters of the land reform law “said that its objective was the promotion of democracy” and the eradication of “feudalism.” Since tenancy was virtually eliminated and since Japan became a bastion of

⁸⁹ Baba Hiroyuki, email interview with author, 2014. A number of other interviews were conducted in the course of writing this study and many broadly echo the Baba story.

democracy or at least non-communism, critiques of the land reform have focused mostly on its economic impact. Reformers and theorists often took a nuanced stance on the relation of land reform to economic development, seeing the fragmentation of ownership as a potential step backward while believing that long-term gains would follow and be more evenly distributed. In the most successful cases of land reform, namely Japan and Taiwan, agricultural output and rural incomes began to increase much sooner than even reformers had hoped, but decisively linking those gains to land reform has been difficult for historians and economists.⁹⁰

Historians often observe that purchases of land from landlords were cash transactions, and this proved to be an important weakness in the reform since inflation wiped out the value of those cash payments within a couple of years or even a few months. It is true that the central government made cash payments directly to landlords at a value equal to their actual earnings from the land, namely the rent they collected minus the taxes they paid. This was the largest lump sum that landlords received during the reform and therefore the one most frequently discussed. But there was another form of payment to landlords as well, one that prefigured the securities payment schemes of later American-backed land reforms. When local land reform committees took ownership of a plot of land, they gave the landlord a government bond for the taxable value of the land carrying 3.6% interest and “redeemable in 24 equal installments.” Being so small, so

⁹⁰ Dore, 146. Perhaps the latest word on the question of the Japanese land reform and economic development comes from economist Mark Ramseyer, who argues in an article published in late 2015 that any attempt to link land reform to increased productivity is a “fable.” See Mark Ramseyer, “The Fable of Land Reform: Leases and Credit Markets in Occupied Japan,” *Journal of Economics & Management Strategy* 24, no. 4 (Winter 2015).

slow to grow, and amortized over so long a period, the bonds from the land commissions felt even less significant than the cash from the central government. Together the two forms of compensation “bought just one salted salmon” per tan of land, in the words of economist Shirosu Nasu.⁹¹

Although the falling value of the yen until 1952 renders firm numbers almost meaningless, the gap between seller compensation and buyer payments had important ramifications for future land reforms. Economist V.K.R.V. Rao estimates that landlords received an average of 978 yen per tan of paddy land and 577 yen per tan of dry field, taking into consideration both the bonds and the cash “bonuses.” Tenants paid 757 yen for each tan of rice land and 447 yen for each dry field tan, amounts equal to the values of the bonds alone. Where the bonds bore 3.6% interest, tenants owed 3.2% interest for each of the 30 years they had to finish paying for the land. The Japanese government, backed by the United States, was in a position to make up the difference between compensation and earnings, but just a couple of years later South Korean landlords and their allies in the Korean legislature would hold out for a land reform that compensated sellers at a more favorable rate. As we shall see, the compensation issue was one of several factors that caused the South Korean land reform to proceed more slowly than the Japanese one, but Korean landlord concerns were justified in light of how little the Japanese landlords received.⁹²

Historian Al McCoy, writing in 1970, typified the view that land reform was a

⁹¹ Sessaiah, viii-ix.

⁹² Sessaiah, viii-ix.

matter of forestalling communist agitation in rural areas. That impulse existed to some degree in 1945-46 and to a much greater degree in the subsequent land reforms of the late 1940s, 50s, and 60s. Anticommunism had motivated Wolf Ladejinsky ever since his family's experience with Soviet expropriation a quarter of a century earlier. Yet land redistribution was not an inevitable consequence of anticommunism; it emerged from America's self-image. American reformers understood land redistribution to be consistent with American economic principles, and saw it as a positive good rather than a necessary evil. McCoy himself noticed, and criticized, the belief among American reformers that "Western democracy had been based on the classical economic liberalism of the individual yeoman farmer" and that they could create in Asia "an agrarian middle class based on a family farm tied firmly to a free market economy." Anticommunism provided a sense of urgency, but Jeffersonian ideals provided the solution. If communism had not existed, then antifeudalism, so evident in early occupation rhetoric, would probably have provided enough reason to carry out the redistribution.⁹³

In identifying one overarching ideology among American reformers, the ideology of anti-insurgency, McCoy differs from scholars who see policymakers' pro-democratic and pro-development agendas as ends unto themselves. Steven Schwartzberg, paraphrasing English agriculturalist Arthur Young (a favorite of Ladejinsky as well), says that in the minds of occupation planners "there was a magic about ownership of land that could turn sand into gold." The idea of land reform enjoyed such a high degree of consensus that it found equal support among so-called New Dealers, Japan hands, hard

⁹³ McCoy, 15, 18.

peace advocates, and soft peace advocates, categories historians often use to describe supposed factions of occupation planners within the U.S. government. Schwartzberg argues that these labels are largely fictive and that there was more consensus about how to conduct the occupation than many scholars recognize. Land reform, which survived the reverse course in Japan, the loss of China, and a domestic Red Scare to remain a key feature of American foreign policy, is a well-chosen case in point.⁹⁴

According to Schwartzberg, the pigeonholing of postwar planners into two categories, New Dealers (pro-reform) and old hands (anti-reform), is a “political rather than an historiographical claim” that has “needlessly obscured” the historical record. Grew, who according to McCoy and other historians was the U.S. government's leading conservative on Japan, made a number of public and private statements in support of reform. On the issue of land reform in particular he stated that one of “the most important step[s]” toward destroying “the old feudal system” was to “give the farmers a new deal and a chance to raise their standard of living.” Schwartzberg traces the idea of Grew as an opponent of reform to Grew's political opponents, who argued that Grew and others in the U.S. government merely wanted to replace one set of elites in Japan with another, more cooperative set. Certainly postwar planners hoped that the new leaders of Japanese government and industry would come from the “Anglo-American school” of liberal internationalists as opposed to the nationalistic, militaristic group that had been in power before the surrender or the Communists and radicals who might seek to come to power after. Similarly, land reform was meant to create “little capitalists” out of “serfs.” Yet, as

⁹⁴ Schwartzberg, 2; Ladejinsky, “Land Reform in Japan,” 227.

Schwartzberg demonstrates, this hope did not mean that Grew and other “conservatives” opposed dramatic and ambitious policies like land reform, or that they worked to preserve and strengthen the position of current elites.⁹⁵

While statistics tell a tale of tenant success — an increase in the share of Japanese farmland tilled by owner-operators from 54% to 90%, an increase in owner-operators from 38% of all farmers to 70%, and a decline in the amount of farmers who rented more land than they owned from 39% to 6% — McCoy held that such numbers failed to take account of the political ramifications of reform. Land reform's most profound achievement, in McCoy's view, was not the amelioration of rural inequality *per se*, but the elimination of it as “the major source of lower class solidarity.” In this he agrees with early leftist critics of the reform that a “communal” structure would have been preferable over a broader base of individual ownership. Whatever the strengths of that approach, it seems clear that it is not what the majority of tenants would have preferred.⁹⁶

Yet McCoy does identify some important areas where the land reform fell short of what it could have achieved. Forestry was a significant factor in Japan's rural economy given that about two-thirds of the country is woodland, and McCoy says that “in mountainous areas where lumbering supplements or dominates the rural economy, owners of large woodlots continued to dominate the life of the village.” McCoy also criticizes the average 3-hectare retention limit as too large, and certainly a smaller number would have allowed for even more redistribution at an even greater expense of

⁹⁵ Schwartzberg, 2, 6, 13, 16.

⁹⁶ Schwartzberg, 6; McCoy, 19-21. For a discussion of the efforts of the Communist Party to encourage collective agriculture as an alternative to the land reform, see Yamaguchi, 32-34.

each plot's "productivity," but because he does not provide the historical context of that number he does not credit occupation authorities with insisting on a limit that was significantly lower than the Japanese government itself would have set. At the same time, McCoy criticizes the size of Japanese farms for forcing "smaller farmers who were unable to maintain themselves on such small holdings to seek part-time or regular outside employment." The alleviation of the pressure of a large rural population on a relatively small amount of arable land through the increase of urban and non-farm employment opportunities was in fact a goal of the occupation, and Dore cites it as the development most responsible for "maintaining the average income of farm families at a higher rate than before the war" — more responsible, indeed, than the land reform.⁹⁷

Economists struggled for years to determine whether Japan's increased rate of agricultural productivity was the result of the land reform. Unfortunately for economists, but fortunately for Japanese farmers as well as urbanites, land redistribution corresponded with improvements in fertilizers, pesticides, irrigation techniques, and seed strains. Shigeto Kawano's conclusion was typical of the economic studies of the policy, most of which appeared in the 1960s and '70s. "It seems to us," he wrote, "that in the period under review [1951-54], the Land Reform cannot necessarily be said to have raised agricultural productivity explicitly." Similarly, Harold Voelkner, in a piece for USAID, wrote that the Japanese land reform's "effect on productivity and total production must be

⁹⁷ McCoy, 18-19. Dore, 211.

seen as only marginal.”⁹⁸

Yet Kawano argued that that land reform had “raised both the average consumption level and the average propensity to consume of farmers, resulting in a big expansion of the domestic consumption market.” In the early 1950s farmers were expanding their homes, buying more furniture and household goods, eating and drinking more, using more electrical and gas power, buying more premade clothing, and spending more on education and “culture” activities. Owner farmers' disposable income, Kawano said, increased only a little between the 1930s and the 1950s, but tenant farmers and tenants who became owners during that period (most of whom did so because of the land reform) saw their disposable income grow an average of 43%. All categories of farmers devoted a larger amount of their income to consumption after land reform than before it. The growth in consumption was so great that it outpaced the growth in disposable income, meaning that the rate of savings declined for all kinds of farmers.⁹⁹

Kawano believed that the post-reform consumption was driven by land reform's chief beneficiaries, the ex-tenants. The income of former tenants grew as a result of the near-elimination of rent payments, and the money they would have spent on rent went not so much to savings, nor even to farm inputs, but to increased household consumption. Net income was up, but “expenditure has gone up too,” a farmer told Dore. This increase in consumption “induced a similar rise in the case of owner farmers” through “a sort of 'demonstration effect'” — keeping up with the Tanakas, one might say. Households that

⁹⁸ Shigeto Kawano, “Economic Significance of the Land Reform in Japan,” *The Developing Economies* 3, no. 2 (1965), 139; Voelkner, 7.

⁹⁹ Kawano, 147-49.

had already been owner-farmers before the reform had not seen their incomes rise as dramatically as the ex-tenant households, so an added burden. Though the preexisting owner farmers and the ex-tenants now had the same income on average, they perceived different trade-offs when allocating their resources. Before the land reform tenants saved only an average of 10% of their income, and owners had saved about 18%. After the land reform, tenants saved slightly less at 7%, but an increase in their overall income meant that the real decrease in saving was negligible. The rest went to consumption. To keep up with ex-tenants' consumption without a concomitant increase in disposable income required the longtime owner-farmer families to cut their annual savings. The saving rate for these families dropped from 18% to 7%.¹⁰⁰

In the English language literature, perhaps only Takemae Eiji has addressed Ainu protests of the land reform. The Ainu are an ethnic group separate from the dominant Japanese culture and reside primarily in the far north of the archipelago. Some Ainu families owned land — which in the northern island of Hokkaidō is broader and flatter than in other parts of Japan — but worked only part of it or left it untended while they worked seasonally in other jobs. Under the terms of the land reform Ainu owners' frequent absence made them absentee owners, despite their intermittent reliance on the land for subsistence. Their plots therefore fell into the hands of eligible buyers who were “mainly Yamato Japanese,” and though the Ainu staged protests, GHQ reformers “ignored minority interests.” Takemae also addresses “land alienation” among the Ryukyuan ethnic community in the far southern island of Okinawa, an alienation bound

¹⁰⁰ Kawano, 149; Dore, 206.

up in the creation of American military bases that are still a source of friction. All the same, Takemae feels that within mainland Japan “the Jeffersonian ideal of independent yeoman producers” — small, entrepreneurial, and democratic — “was realized to a remarkable extent.”¹⁰¹

As early as 1962 the land reform's legal restrictions on ownership began to erode. That year a law opened an avenue for farmers and agricultural cooperatives to buy land in excess of the three-hectare limit as long as the registered owner or ownership group did all the farming without tenant labor. Much of the land purchased in this way came from small farmers who had decided to leave farming and pursue other careers. The parents of Ōsaka Go in Tōhoku's Akita prefecture provides an example: they had lost over two hectares of rice fields in the land reform but remained primarily farmers and fishermen, and in the 1960s the Ōsaka family bought back the land they had lost and some additional plots besides. At the same time that the land reform was rolled back, however, the Japanese government began searching for ways to curtail rice production, which had begun to exceed consumption as the Japanese diet expanded to include more meat, bread, and Western-style foods.¹⁰²

Among American land reformers there was no doubt that Japan's reform had been a great success. Tenancy, seen as a relic of feudal times that was inconsistent with American economic and political values and might have been an avenue for communist exploitation, had been brought to the brink of elimination, and widely-distributed

¹⁰¹ Takemae, 339, 440-41.

¹⁰² Voelkner, 27-29; Ōsaka Go, email interview with author, 2014. For the later history of rice production policies in Japan, see for example Aurelia George, *Rice Politics in Japan* (Canberra; Australia-Japan Research Center, 1988).

economic development in Japan solidified ex-tenants' gains. Ladejinsky, Raper, and others who worked on the program would move on to new land reform challenges. Their goals did not change, nor for the most part did their techniques, but outcomes would never again be so widely praised.

Chapter 3: Korea: The American Military as Landlord and Land Reformer

INTRODUCTION

The United States military began its occupation of Korea south of the 38th parallel on September 8, 1945 shortly after the surrender of Japan, which had occupied the country since 1910. When the Americans arrived, about 50% of cultivated land in the country belonged to about 4% of the population. In 1948 the area under American control officially became known as South Korea, and in 1949 a reluctant South Korean legislature passed a land redistribution law known as the Farmland Reform Law. A significant part of the country's tenanted farmland, though, had been redistributed before the law's passage. This was due to an unusual situation that arose early in the occupation when the United States Army Military Government in [South] Korea (USAMGIK) took over the management of a Japanese paragovernmental agency called the Oriental Development Company. Since this company had owned a lot of farmland, the American military government became Korea's largest landlord. Through the renamed New Korea Company, Americans were able to sell about 370,000 jeongbo of land, or about 44% of South Korea's 840,000 jeongbo, without waiting for a formal land reform law. (A jeongbo, also spelled chongbo, is exactly equivalent to a chō; both are 2.451 acres or about 1 hectare.) The remaining 56%, 470,000 jeongbo, was sold to qualified buyers after the land reform law took effect. The number of South Korean farmers who were owner-operators rose from just 14% in 1945 to 70% two decades later – a long timeframe compared to Japan, even considering the disruptions of the Korean War, but with broadly

similar outcomes to the Japanese and, later, Taiwanese reforms. This chapter demonstrates that the established American commitment to land redistribution and the methods used to achieve it were unaltered by the circumstances particular to Korea, among them direct American ownership of land and proximity to a communist neighbor.¹⁰³

The New Korea Company, which played a central role in South Korean land reform, had its roots in the Japanese colonial period. At its creation in 1908 it was known as the Oriental Development Company (Tōyō Takushoku Kabushiki Kaisha) and was managed from Tokyo as a “quasi-public corporation.” According to a SCAP summary produced in November 1945, the purpose of the company had been “to exploit the resources of the Empire” for the benefit of a few shareholders “closely connected with the Japanese Government.” Specifically it was at the time of the surrender the largest landowner in Korea, landlord to Japanese and Korean middlemen and Korean tenant farmers, providing needed agricultural inputs and collecting rents and crops for the benefit of the Japanese empire. Jun Uchida recounts that the company’s original intent was to help Japanese farmers settle on and develop Korean land over which it claimed suzerainty, but the number of interested immigrants was well below official projections. Eventually, in the 1930s, the company actually exported people to other parts of the Japanese empire, diverting some of its Korean farmers to Manchuria. The company’s office in Korea had an almost all-Japanese staff and, as it broadened its scope, came to

¹⁰³ Robert Morrow and Kenneth Sherper, “Land Reform in South Korea” (U.S. Agency for International Development, 1970), i; Ledesma, 6.

exercise control over almost four dozen Korean companies (ostensibly managed by cooperative Korean owners) valued at over 4 billion yen.¹⁰⁴

In late 1945 the Americans arrived in Korea to replace the defeated Japanese. General Archibald Arnold, the first military governor, had commanded troops during the fighting in the Philippines and on Okinawa. As military governor Arnold was subordinate to his wartime boss MacArthur, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, but since MacArthur and his staff were in Tokyo Arnold was effectively on his own for day-to-day affairs in the southern part of the Korean peninsula. (The northern part was the purview of the Soviet Union.) Arnold's first statement to the Korean public, a liberated population rather than a conquered one, included a promise to restore the land that had been taken from them by the Japanese during the previous 35 years.¹⁰⁵

In short order the American authorities purged the Oriental Development Company of its Japanese staff and reopened it under its new name, the New Korea Company, in the autumn of 1945. A few Korean employees who had performed tasks the Americans considered "useless," such as the "tea girls" that were commonplace in many Japanese and Korean offices, were sacked as well. Yet apart from personnel changes and a new name, much of the old structure of the company remained in place. As before, it was divided into departments of Forestry, Finance, Agriculture, Mining and Industry, and

¹⁰⁴ Jun Uchida, *Brokers of Empire: Japanese Settle Colonialism in Korea, 1976-1945* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 59-61, 317; SCAP, *Summary of Non-Military Activities in Japan and Korea* no. 2, November 1945, SCAP Summation Reports box 1, HSTL, 189; C. Clyde Mitchell, *Final Report and History of the New Korea Company* (Seoul: USAMGIK, National Land Administration, April 30, 1948), 2-3; Karl Moskowitz, "The Creation of the Oriental Development Company: Japanese Illusions Meet Korean Reality," *Occasional Papers on Korea* 2 (March 1974), 74.

¹⁰⁵ Morrow and Sherper, 18.

Administration, and continued to operate “with the majority of the subsidiary companies” that had been under the Oriental Development Company. One of the most significant differences between the old company and the new was that the old one had had access to resources throughout the country, including the areas now off-limits beyond the 38th parallel — North Korea, the Soviet zone of occupation. The greatest difference, though, was the fact that the New Korea Company's role was not to acquire wealth, but to divest itself of what it had inherited. In the course of doing so, the company, in the words of leading Korean War scholar Bruce Cumings, “proved to be one of the more successful and efficient agencies of the [military government] during the occupation.”¹⁰⁶

This chapter, like the preceding one, is concerned with what American reformers thought they were doing and, in retrospect, what they thought they had done. Secondary works from Cumings, Charles Armstrong, and Jun Uchida help to describe the political context in which reform took place, while a spate of recent English-language Korean scholarship from Cho Seok Gon, Kim Seong Bo, Lee Yong-ki, and others provides new insights into the consequences of land reform in the South. A preponderance of attention, though, is given to the writings of USAMGIK officials and USAID staffers whose implicit purpose in chronicling previous reforms was to prepare their colleagues for the next one. It was through these institutional biographies that the philosophies and techniques of American-style land reform were carried over from one country to the next, tweaked in details but consistent in aims even when the Cold War broke out into real war.

¹⁰⁶ Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes, 1945-47* (Princeton University Press, 1981), 205; SCAP, *Summary of Non-Military Activities in Japan and Korea* no. 2, 189; Mitchell, 52.

THE AMERICAN MILITARY GOVERNMENT AS LANDLORD

Under Japanese occupation, Korean landowners lost land to Japanese companies and private owners and the Koreans who collaborated with them. Japanese extraction of agricultural resources, especially rice which Korean farmers produced three metric tons per hectare of in 1937 and 1938 (comparable to 1970 levels as a result of “intensive land use policies promoted by the Japanese”), was not paired with reform of landlord-tenant relations of the sort that happened in Japanese-occupied Taiwan (see chapter 4). In Korea, simple Japanese expropriation of farmland was formalized through an 8-year cadastral survey covering some 4.8 million hectares and involving 3,400 field researchers. As Korea’s land was catalogued, a “report system” allowed Japanese citizens (and some “well-placed Koreans”) to simply declare it as their property, thus reducing the original Korean owners to, at best, middlemen between the working tenants and the Japanese owners. Japanese companies sent Korean rice to Japan and imported “rough grains” from Manchuria to feed the Korean population. During the same period, the development of industry in Korea took place primarily in the north. South of the 38th parallel, agriculture, supplemented by Japanese farm credit, fertilizer, irrigation, and marketing infrastructures as well as an extensive network of agricultural associations reaching down to the village level, was the main occupation of 2,065,477 households or roughly 80% of the population when World War II ended. Over 63% of the south’s two million hectares of farmland, including 69% of its paddy land which now produced just 2.4 metric tons of rice per hectare as a result of wartime breakdowns in agricultural

services, was under tenancy when the Americans occupation began. Only 14% of households, about 300,000 of them, owned all of the land they farmed, but 35% (720,000) owned some. Full tenant families accounted for about 51%, down from 55% in 1938, which could have been a good sign except that the portion of full owners had fallen by an equal amount during the same period. Around 40% of farms were less than half a hectare.¹⁰⁷

The American military administration of Korea was almost an afterthought, taking a backseat to matters in Japan, the defeated superpower. Large, detailed volumes of surveys and reports that SCAP's occupation headquarters published each month in Tokyo relegated Korean matters to the back pages. The best firsthand information on Korean land reform comes from the "final report and history" of the New Korea Company, written by its director C. Clyde Mitchell and printed in Seoul in April 1948. The occasion for Mitchell's report was the absorption of the company into a new agency called the National Land Administration as part of the shift in August 1948 from an American military government and an interim Korean legislature to a permanent, autonomous, ostensibly-democratic Korean government. Mitchell's final report aimed "to be a complete summary of the activities of the New Korea Co., Ltd. from the beginning of the U.S. Occupation" in Korea to the end.¹⁰⁸

At its establishment the New Korea Company became the owner of almost all ex-Japanese lands in South Korea. Such land was not always easy to identify, since the

¹⁰⁷ Morrow and Sherper, 2-5, 7, 9, 11-13, 17.

¹⁰⁸ Mitchell, "Final Report and History of the New Korea Company," 1.

Japanese cadastral surveys were by then decades old, so company staff made “painstaking title searches. . . in every Tax and District Registry office south of the 38th parallel” and then “personally inventoried every plot.” The total amount that came under company control was 324,604 jeongbo, the bulk of which, 205,988 jeongbo, was paddy land. The rest was comprised of dry fields, forests, and miscellaneous land. This acreage was spread over 587,974 individual farms, and on these farms lived over 3,300,000 people, about 24% of South Korea's farm population. The Oriental Development Company had been the largest prior owner of this land, but the holdings of an additional 102,844 Japanese individuals and groups now belonged to the New Korea Company as well. Many of the previous owners were Japanese colonists who had immigrated to Korea and bought land from the Oriental Development Company.¹⁰⁹

Tenant farmers were working much of the now company-owned land. When the company identified a piece of farmland as having belonged to a Japanese owner, it exercised its authority as landlord to issue a new, standardized lease with a new, lower rent. That rent was paid in kind until cash rents became standardized in 1947. Many of the tenants who received these New Korea Company leases were also renting land from South Korean owners at rates between 30 and 80%, to be paid in kind. The terms of those private rental arrangements, which in the south were typically unwritten one-year leases, were unaffected by company policy. An October 5, 1945 decree from the military government capped all rents at no more than one-third the value of a plot's yield and prohibited the “unilateral” eviction of tenants, measures that Cumings says “proved to be

¹⁰⁹ Mitchell, 2-3, 5, 20-21. For more on Japanese settlers in Korea, see Uchida, *Brokers of Empire*.

very popular.” From its tenants the company proceeded to collect the 1945 rents on schedule, and directed the revenue toward land reclamation and improvement as well as agricultural training. The need to document each plot's location, productivity, and tenant status, and to improve the land and train farmers in better practices, necessitated doubling of the company's staff through the hiring of an additional 1500 employees. The New Korea Company entered 1946 as the largest landlord in South Korea, and it exceeded the old Oriental Development Company in size as well as in the amount of its holdings.¹¹⁰

Yet Mitchell estimated that up to 15,000 jeongbo of South Korean land that was owned by Japanese individuals or groups at the time of the surrender still remained in private hands as of April 1948. The owners of this land were mostly non-agricultural, corporate entities like banks and railroads whose owners were “extremely reluctant to turn over these properties” to the New Korea Company due to their continued profitability and the fact that they had leased and subleased the land to “favored individuals.” Mitchell could not be more precise about the amount of land that existed under such arrangements because the owners had not always been forthcoming about the fact that their parcels had legally belonged to Japanese entities as of August 1945. Yet he suspected that the Korean tenants working the land would know the land's history and be willing to identify their landlords during a reform program in order to have the opportunity to purchase the land for themselves.¹¹¹

Disputes over ownership began well before the land reform program came into

¹¹⁰ Cumings, 203; Mitchell, 5-6, 9, 19; Morrow and Sherper, iii, 5-6, 18.

¹¹¹ Mitchell., 7.

being. In most cases, disputes centered on land that South Korean individuals or companies claimed they had purchased, or were in the process of purchasing, from Japanese owners prior to the surrender. The New Korea Company became the owner of record for such land and left the investigation and settlement of the disputes to an entity called the Property Claims Commission. This commission sometimes found evidence in favor of the prospective South Korean owners, at which time the company turned over the land as well as any “cash profits accruing to the land during the period since surrender date,” such as the 1945 rent payment. Yet for a number of would-be owners, no evidence existed to support their claims, and as late as the spring of 1948 there was “a large backlog of such cases.” As a show of good faith, however, the company decided that disputed parcels would not be sold or distributed “until the rightful owner has been determined.”¹¹²

According to Mitchell, the “most successful feature” of the New Korea Company’s existence was the grain procurement program of 1947. Perhaps so, but the collection of rice quotas from Korean farmers was the result of one of the most colossal failures of U.S. military government policy. When the occupation began the military government had declared an end to the rice quota system the Japanese government had used from 1943-1945 and declared a “free market,” but rice was in short supply and prices increased dramatically. Reversing course, the military government reinstituted quotas, requiring a set amount of rice and other grains from every grain-growing household in South Korea in order to feed urban populations beset by rapid inflation and

¹¹² Mitchell, 9.

food shortages. These grain quotas were levied on farm households in addition to, rather than in place of, the rent charged on their land.¹¹³

American occupiers like Mitchell ascribed special importance to the 1947 grain procurement season because the fall of 1946 had been so unstable. In 1946 the collection of grain from non-company land had been the responsibility of the Korean National Police and provincial rice collection boards consisting of “police officials, village elders, businessmen, and large landowners.” These boards and the police units (“rice details,” also bitterly referred to by farmers as “raiding parties”) that enforced their quotas were deeply unpopular among rural people, and reports reached the military government of unreasonable detentions of farmers and other police abuses such as “skimming rice for their personal use.” Farmers resisted the grain quotas; a substantial portion of South Korea's 1946 crop yield found its way to the black market, where buyers paid farmers well above the regulated price for grains. (Early in the American occupation, rice prices were temporarily unregulated due to a “free market” policy, but the result had been much the same: “speculation, hoarding, and overconsumption” led to shortages.) A “partial breakdown of the urban ration system,” Mitchell's euphemistic term for a shortage of food in cities, drove hungry people and profiteers alike to the black market. Yet even a thriving underground economy could not alleviate hunger and discontent: in the fall of 1946, urban South Korea saw widespread strikes and deadly riots against police that prompted even deadlier reprisals from the American armed forces under the new military

¹¹³ For more on the rice quota incident see Kim Jinwung, “A Policy of Amateurism: The Rice Policy of the U.S. Army Military Government in Korea, 1945-1948,” *Korea Journal* 47, no. 2 (June 2007); Mitchell, 9-10.

governor, General Archer Lerch.¹¹⁴

There was unrest in rural parts of the country, too. Mobs of peasants in South Jeolla in the far southwestern corner of the country killed at least ten police officers and destroyed two dozen police boxes (small police stations also common in Japan) in November 1946. The police responded with deadly force, killing at least 54 peasants. That same month, a New Korea Company warehouse was stormed and its records set on fire.¹¹⁵

To “crack down” on illicit rice sales and take control of a generally dangerous situation, the military government took grain procurement authority away from the Korean police and local collecting boards and gave the New Korea Company authority to procure grain from all land farmed by its tenants, including land owned by other landlords. The company carried out its new mandate in 1947 to the satisfaction of Mitchell, but the expansion of the company’s authority would expose a rift between its American and Korean employees.¹¹⁶

“HIGHLY SUSPICIOUS”: MISTRUST BETWEEN AMERICAN AND KOREAN OFFICIALS

In general, the New Korea Company's Korean staff members were not in favor of undertaking more responsibility for grain procurement. Whereas company rents applied only to company-owned land, the grain quota applied to all grain-growing farmland regardless of owner. Many of the Korean employees felt that food procurement was a

¹¹⁴ Cumings, 204-6; Mitchell, 9-10; Morrow and Sherper, 14-15.

¹¹⁵ Cumings, 365-66.

¹¹⁶ Mitchell, 9-10; Morrow and Sherper, 14-15.

matter best left to the provinces and local officials, but the company's relationship with local-level Korean authorities was quite poor. Mitchell accused some officials of playing favorites with wealthy farmers by lowering their grain quotas and making up the difference by increasing quotas for “poor and non-vocal tenants.” He also criticized provincial, gun, myun, and village bureaucrats for issuing confusing orders to their subordinates that contradicted official policy, for trying to protect their “prestige” and “face” at the expense of rivals, and trying to maximize the “travel money” they received from the military government. Undoubtedly one of the motivating factors behind Korean officials' behavior was the high rate of inflation that caused government paychecks to lag far behind the cost of living. It was for this reason that some American employees of the New Korea Company “strongly suspected” that a number of their own Korean colleagues were making ends meet “by some sort of stealing and embezzlement.” Despite such reported problems, the company carried out its new mandate with zeal, and Mitchell informed the military governor that procurement “from New Korea Company tenants led the nation in every province.”¹¹⁷

The company's achievements in grain and rent collection depended in part on the maintenance of a physical presence in rural areas. The large number of personnel, particularly Korean personnel, at the company's disposal allowed it to station individuals known as “tenant supervisors” in villages. These supervisors, 3,359 of them in all, lived

¹¹⁷ Mitchell, 10, 17-19, 55. On the matter of rampant inflation in South Korea, Kim Jeom Sook has argued that the U.S. Congress and the USAMGIK exacerbated the situation through irresponsible fiscal policies. See Kim Jeom Sook, “Occupational Costs Incurred by the United States Forces in Korea and their Impact on the Korean Economy during the U.S. Military Occupation Period,” *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 24, no. 2 (December 2011).

in close proximity to company tenants and were responsible for maintaining the written leases and tracking the rent and grain quota payments of the tenants in their jurisdictions. This system also allowed the company to bypass many of the local-level authorities with whom they differed. From their supervisors tenants could purchase, in installments and for relatively low cost, goods such as new and improved seeds, chemical fertilizers and insecticides, and farm equipment. Supervisors also helped to identify land for improvement and to oversee projects such as flood repair in the wake of 1946's unusually heavy summer rains. Because many villages lacked facilities such as farm credit agencies, which the U.S. military government hoped to establish in the future, the creation of tenant supervisors was also an attempt to fulfill some of the same purpose. Mitchell spoke of the supervisors replicating some of the “valuable functions of the landlord” without the trade-off of high rents and capricious evictions.¹¹⁸

A necessary prerequisite to a land reform program was a survey of tenancy conditions, and this the New Korea Company carried out in 1947. The survey only applied to company tenants — i.e., the tenants who had previously worked Japanese-owned land. Unsurprisingly, this land was generally of a higher quality than land that had remained Korean-owned under Japanese rule. The company survey therefore did not provide a nationwide picture of farm tenancy in Korea, but gave a detailed account of tenancy in areas under company control. The output value of farms, the demographics of farm families, and other factors were studied and reported to the military governor.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Mitchell, 14, 16-17.

¹¹⁹ Mitchell, 20.

Mitchell took pains to ensure that the survey would pave the way toward “the future land distribution program.” Instead of studying a statistical sample of company farms and extrapolating the rest, the company aimed for “100% coverage if possible” and achieved an impressive 94% account of the company's tenanted holdings. As Mitchell explained,

The question of whether *each* NKC tenant should be sold his NKC land would depend to a great measure upon how much land he owned or rented from other landlords. It was deemed essential therefore, to get on the books, long before the tenant had any hint as to the form of the land sale program, a true record of all the land he farmed and his production thereupon.

Mitchell's experience with local-level officials made him especially concerned about fraud. He expressed fear that if the survey were carried out after the announcement of a land reform program, “untrue data” would creep in from wealthier farmers and unscrupulous bureaucrats in an attempt to minimize their losses.¹²⁰

The survey showed that, on average, a company tenant household was a family of five or six people, most of whom depended on the farm for their livelihood. The average farm, including all land rented from the company, rented from other owners, and owned by the tenant, was just 0.85 jeongbo. Just 15% of tenant families worked more than 1 jeongbo of land, while 21% actually had less than 0.3 jeongbo from which to make a living. Rice was by far the most common crop among company tenants, taking up on average 0.576 jeongbo per farm. As for average rents, although the company had set a legal limit of a third of the value of the crop when it became the owner of ex-Japanese farms, subleases caused the actual rent burden on some tenants to reach as high as 50 or

¹²⁰ Mitchell, 20. Emphasis in original.

60%.¹²¹

In his report Mitchell rejected only one of the survey's results, namely the reported rice output per jeongbo. In 1946, this figure was 15.814 seok of “rough” rice (1 seok of rough rice is equivalent to 100kg.) Mitchell described that number as “highly suspicious.” As he explained, during Japanese rule farmers and some officials turned in rice harvest numbers that were “as low as possible to evade the Japanese grain collection schemes.” He worried that the practice had continued into the era of the American occupation. Mitchell concluded that “nearly *all* Korean statistics of agricultural production have been falsified downward” by at least 10% and possibly as much as 30% in some areas. The underreporting of rice production had been yet another factor in the decision to allow the New Korea Company more autonomy in grain collection in 1947.¹²²

Rented orchards were at the heart of one of the most dramatic incidents, or near-incidents, that Mitchell reported to the military governor. In its mission to combat the underreporting of crop yields, in 1947 the company sent an American-educated Korean “orchard specialist” into the countryside to ascertain the actual productivity of fruit tree land. Between about 25 and 33% of the orchards he inspected had apparently not been truthful about their actual productivity. According to Mitchell's report, the official conducting the inspections “had his life threatened many times” during the course of his assignment. Most notably, while traveling on a road near Taegu with an American official, the Korean specialist was confronted by a “mob” of tenants whom he had

¹²¹ Mitchell, 21-22; 26.

¹²² Mitchell, 21-23. Emphasis in original.

accused of falsifying harvest figures. The official would “undoubtedly” have received “a serious beating,” said Mitchell, but for the presence of the American witness. Fraud and the potential for violence were reminders that the company was not a thoroughly welcome presence in the Korean countryside, and that tenants desired greater autonomy.¹²³

Most Korean farmers belonged to some form of agricultural association, but these did not give tenants a great deal of control over their own affairs. The most basic rural organization was a *kye*, common in small villages and among familial clans. The *kye* served “single functions such as maintenance of village schools or providing a mechanism for collecting village taxes.” Some also provided credit or spread new farming technologies among their members. Suzy Kim, in her treatment of the North Korean land reform, reports that *kye* were “dismantl[ed]... throughout the peninsula” during the decades of Japanese rule. This dismantling was partly intentional, as the Japanese occupiers replaced native, village-level aid associations with an official nationwide farmers’ organization, and partly a byproduct of increased economic competition among Korea’s farmers as cash cropping replaced subsistence farming and the price of inputs increased.¹²⁴

During Japanese rule, especially from 1926 onward, Korean farmers belonged by law to an officially, multi-level network of farmer’s organizations known as the Korean Agricultural Association, which provided them with assorted agricultural inputs and

¹²³ Mitchell, 31.

¹²⁴ Suzy Kim, *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950* (Cornell University Press, 2013), 57-58; Morrow and Sherper, 15-16.

services. Yet the farmers themselves did not have a say in association policy, which ultimately served the interests of Japan by facilitating the procurement and purchase of rice for export, and its services deteriorated when the war began to go badly for Japan. During the American occupation, the gulf between Korean farmers and Korean officials in the New Korea Company bred mistrust on both sides. It is no wonder that many farmers seem to have viewed the company as more of the same, and did not immediately see its policies as an improvement.¹²⁵

Neither did Korean officials inside the company, though their reasons for mistrusting it were quite different. Cold War ideology was the main source of contention between American staffers and their Korean colleagues, but it was not the Americans who took a hard-line anticommunist stance. Mitchell's description of a political rift within the company is unusually direct for an official report, and should be quoted at length:

Inasmuch as much of the National Land Administration [Korean] staff were of very conservative tendencies, they were not at all in favor of selling the land to the present tenants. Most of them expressed the desire to screen the purchasers very closely, to make sure no farmers who were "communist sympathizers" were sold their land. Inasmuch as "communist sympathy" is about as difficult to prove in Korea as in any other country where certain basic freedoms of thought and speech are maintained, the charge that a farmer was a communist sympathizer usually meant simply that the man making the accusation disliked the accused. . .

The only criterion of whether or not a farmer should be sold his land, in the opinion of the land-reform committee, and as written in the law, was whether or not he had paid his rent, turned in his grain quota, or otherwise observed the terms of his tenancy contract. One of the best ways to prevent political patronage from dictating who should buy his farm, it was felt, was to insist on a rapid disposal plan, giving little time for political pressures to be brought to bear, or local pressure committees to have any effect.

¹²⁵ Morrow and Sherper, 15-16.

Mitchell was silent about the political context that helped to create this apparent rift between American land reformers and their skeptical South Korean coworkers: the land reform already underway in North Korea.¹²⁶

In North Korea, a land reform law had been passed on the relatively early date of March 5, 1946, just six months into the Soviet occupation. It was as thorough as it was timely: not only was all ex-Japanese land confiscated by the state, but so was all land that belonged to “traitors. . . who collaborated with Japanese enslavers.” At the same time, all plots in the North were capped at five jeongbo, and excess acreage was redistributed without compensation to the owners. Tillers of the land received the divvied up plots at no cost. Soviet occupiers and Korean communists crafted the reform, but Kim credits “demands from peasants” for its early passage and radical nature. North Korea scholar Charles Armstrong agrees that “grass-roots demands for reform” played an important role in causing the Soviet occupation government to act on landholding inequities. Tenants dominated local land reform boards that appraised and redistributed land — a situation not dissimilar to that in American-backed reforms. The free redistribution of over half of North Korea’s farm acreage, 1,860,000 jeongbo, took just twenty-five days. There was relatively little bloodshed, partly because many of the North’s landlords fled to the South as the reform got underway. This flight of the landed class in March-April 1946 was “the largest pre-Korean War migration to South Korea,” according to Armstrong.¹²⁷

Even without the specter of a radical land reform in the North, conservative South

¹²⁶ Mitchell, 59.

¹²⁷ Charles Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950* (Cornell University Press, 2003), 46, 77; Cumings, 425; Kim, *Everyday Life*, 76-77.

Korean staffers at the National Land Administration had good reason to worry about the existence of communists in the countryside — “leftist organizations were active at the county level and considerable agitation existed for land reform” in rural communities. Yet the Americans were not about to let anticommunism get in the way of their anticommunist land reform program. Land reform aimed to raise the quality of life of the rural population and thus to reduce the appeal of unrest in general and communism in particular. It was not, however, a tool to punish communist sympathizers, which included many tenant farmers, or to reward vocal anticommunists like the wealthiest and most well-connected elites. On the contrary, it was essential for the success of the land reform program that it benefit the less wealthy irrespective of ideology, even though this entailed a loss of power, wealth, and face for the already anti-communist landlords. Cumings says that “nothing as clearly demonstrates the peculiar combination of warm-spirited good will, benevolent naiveté, and arrogant ethnocentrism that the Americans brought with them to Korea as the record of policies adopted toward land and rice.” Though generally skeptical of policies that originated in Washington and among its agents, Cumings acknowledges the land reform impulse it as genuine and un-cynical.¹²⁸

“A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY” FOR LAND REFORM

Overpopulation in the Korean farm sector was a pressing concern in the minds of company and U.S. military officials. At best, the amount of land available per family was around eight tenths of a hectare. To combine South Korea's small farms into larger, more

¹²⁸ Cumings, 201; Mitchell, 59; Morrow and Sherper, 6.

economical “family-size” plots would accomplish nothing, since most of the farms that could be combined already supported whole families. There were simply too many people and not enough land to support them. An ideal long-term solution would be to increase non-agricultural job opportunities for people living on farms, but persistently high rents and the need to siphon grain from rural areas without destabilizing them meant that something had to be done to ease peasants' economic burdens in the immediate future. As such, Mitchell wrote to the military governor that “although it has not been established that to break up the former Japanese farms of over 2.0 chongbo [jeongbo] is good economics. . . the fact remains it must be done for practical considerations.” Since farms larger than this almost always required tenants or hired laborers in order to function, Mitchell thought it “wise at this time to insist that they be broken up” and sold to the operators of the various parcels.¹²⁹

Moreover, the New Korea Company perceived drawbacks to maintaining its ownership of so much productive land. Although it had been desirable to take over direct ownership in order to reduce rents as well as fraud, and although the company actually expanded its control over South Korean farmland every year between 1945 and 1948, the fact that so much agricultural land was under tenancy presented problems from a developmental perspective. Speaking of orchard land, Mitchell wrote that while short-term leases had allowed the company to replace poor stewards of land with better ones, they did not provide an incentive for “permanent improvements and large investments” such as flood barrier construction and planting new trees to replace sick or old ones. The

¹²⁹ Mitchell, 26.

company recognized that to encourage its tenants to make long-term improvements would require the lengthening of its remaining leases and ultimately the divestment of its holdings.¹³⁰

Yet, as in Japan, there were legislative hurdles to pass before land reform became the law of the land. A U.S. military government committee agreed as early as 1946 on a plan to buy and sell all landlord-owned land in the country, starting with ex-Japanese land and moving on to Korean-owned land. Then, during a period of “Koreanization” of many administrative responsibilities, a joint U.S.-Korean committee replaced this ambitious program with a compromise plan that would have sold off only the formerly Japanese-owned land that the New Korea Company already owned. Military Governor Lerch, following his predecessor Arnold’s lead, delayed putting the full land reform program into action until the elected South Korean government had had a chance to debate and, ideally, pass it. The legislature, known at the time as the South Korean Interim Legislative Assembly, featured representatives from a number of political parties, all of which publicly supported land reform. In practice, however, the assembly’s “rightist elements” (Mitchell’s words) did not support the land reform bill when it came to the table in December 1947, and the moderates and leftists “failed to muster enough real interest to secure action.” Although the scope of the proposed land reform had been greatly reduced by the exemption of Korean-owned land, Korean critics of reform had still balked. Mitchell was incredulous that the legislature had passed on “a golden opportunity to sponsor. . . the first and only really important workable piece of legislation

¹³⁰ Mitchell, 29, 32.

the legislature could have approved in its brief history.” Even if Mitchell did not realize how closely bound the South Korean legislators were to anticommunist South Korean landlords, and therefore how unlikely they were to support a land reform plan, he might have remembered that just a year before on the other side of the sea separating Korea from Japan, Japanese legislators had made the same calculation when they resisted the passage of a strong land reform law.¹³¹

It was an “open secret,” said Mitchell, that a land reform law would come into being with or without the support of the South Korean government. The American military government was the final authority for the setting of policy, and it went into action before the legislature adjourned in March 1948. That month the USAMGIK’s third military governor, General William Dean, who would later be wounded and captured by North Korean forces in a battle near Taejon, gave the order to create the National Land Administration. Years later, Mitchell claimed that Dean moved forward on redistribution despite “considerable pressure. . . from various U.S. politicians” in Washington who wanted the Korean government to distribute the ex-Japanese land rather than the American military government. These particular politicians were probably congressmen, since the pressure was said to come from outside Dean’s chain of command which was vested in the executive branch, but throughout the history of American-backed land reform there were efforts at every level of the American bureaucracy to make reform appear to originate with native governments. In any event, Dean “resisted the pressure” from Washington to wait for an unwilling South Korean government, and thereby ensured

¹³¹ Mitchell, 58, 60; Morrow and Sherper, iii.

that a great deal of redistribution took place before the interruption of the Korean War.¹³²

The National Land Administration's *raison d'être* was the sale of ex-Japanese lands in family-sized parcels. It absorbed most of the New Korea Company's employees, who thus continued to serve as the "personnel frame-work" for "the entire Japanese land-sale program." The company's experienced staff and the massive, detailed body of data they had amassed on South Korean farms and farmers were essential prerequisites to a wider land reform program, and through them the National Land Administration got off to a rapid start. American land reform experts held a "five-day school" in Seoul from March 16 to March 20, 1948 in order to familiarize both American and Korean officials with the land sale program. In its first month of existence the National Land Administration sold about 200,000 of the 587,974 ex-Japanese, ex-New Korea Company parcels to their operators. All told it distributed 91.4% of its holdings to 505,072 buyers.¹³³

The terms of sale were relatively generous to buyers. Paddy plots were not to exceed two hectares in size, a stricter limit than the Japanese land reform by a full hectare. The purchase price was three times the average annual yield of the plot, and buyers had 15 years to finish paying, at no interest. Initial payments were in kind, and the ownership deed — non-transferrable for a minimum of ten years to prevent speculation — transferred to the buyer even before that, on the signing of a contract. If farmers already working the land did not wish to buy, or if land was uncultivated, priority went

¹³² Mitchell, 58-9; Morrow and Sherper, 22, 35.

¹³³ Kim Seong Bo, "South Korea's Land Reform and Democracy," *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 26, no. 1 (June 2013), 53; Mitchell, 58-9; Morrow and Sherper, 22.

first to North Korean refugees and then to nearby South Korean farmers who wished to add to their holdings within the legal limits. In practice, virtually all the land went to the *in-situ* tenants who had right of first refusal, so long as they had paid their “rice collection quota for the previous three years.” American reformers’ mistrust of their Korean colleagues – the fear that they would embezzle from the company, bully tenants, and allow landlords to evade the law – had survived the restructuring of the New Korea Company into the National Land Administration, so a leaflet campaign assured each farmer that “he did not have to pay a bribe to any person to get the land he had been farming.” The biggest oversight in this stage of the program was that “some large tracts of valuable orchard and forest land were not distributed.”¹³⁴

Yet it was a promising beginning. Total agricultural productivity in Korea was still down around 20% from prewar levels (a situation mirrored in Taiwan, another former Japanese colony), but according to later scholarship the output on newly-redistributed land increased faster than the average between 1948 and 1950. The next challenge was to extend the redistribution to non-company land.¹³⁵

TOWARD A KOREAN LAND REFORM

A formal land reform law was required in order to buy and sell privately-held land. The nature of the law was a subject of much discussion before one ever came before the legislature. A body of Korean policy watchers called the "Left-Right Cooperation Committee" (Jwau hapjak wiwonhoe) presented the military government with “a plan for

¹³⁴ Morrow and Sherper, iii, 21-22.

¹³⁵ Morrow and Sherper, i.

land reform that merged the viewpoints of the political left and right. According to this plan, while the farmers were to receive distributed land for free, the landlords also had the option of selling their land” or not. While the military government expressed support for the Left-Right Cooperation Committee’s efforts, the highly heterodox proposal was not in keeping with American thinking on land reform, which held that redistribution should be compulsory. Furthermore, while American reform efforts tried to make land and credit affordable to even the poorest tenants, only the last of the land reform laws addressed in this study, South Vietnam’s Land to the Tiller Law, offered land at absolutely no cost. The Left-Right Cooperation Committee’s proposal was a non-starter.¹³⁶

The Korean government that had rejected the “golden opportunity” proposal was not to be reconvened. Instead, a permanent government, the Republic of Korea, came into existence in August 1948. That same month, the Korean government took over management of the still-young National Land Administration and absorbed its functions into its new Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. In February 1949, that ministry submitted a land reform bill to the new legislature.¹³⁷

The staff of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry was like a set of nested dolls: it included the staff of the short-lived National Land Administration, which in turn contained the nucleus of the New Korea Company. For years, the business of both agencies had been land redistribution. The Americans who had been working on it

¹³⁶ Kim, “South Korea’s Land Reform,” 52.

¹³⁷ Morrow and Sherper, iii.

certainly influenced the land reform bill that the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry submitted to the legislature, but the names of specific authors and the particular points they insisted on are not well publicized. As usual, Mitchell's internal report for the military government is enlightening. Among the American staffers charged with shaping the South Korean land reform, Mitchell said, were some who had been involved with the Farm Security Administration and the Bankhead-Jones Act. Mitchell reported that the initial wave of the Korean land reform, the 1948 redistribution under the National Land Administration, was "patterned (in a simplified form)" after these American programs. The next wave, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry's 1949 bill, was in turn patterned on the 1948 policy. Since the Ministry absorbed the Land Administration when it came into existence, some American advisers who had drafted and supervised the ongoing land reform simply continued to do so.¹³⁸

One of them was Dr. Arthur C. Bunce, an economist from Iowa State College. He was a longtime Korea hand, having lived in the country for six years in the late 1920s and 1930s during the Japanese occupation. In 1944, while Ladejinsky was envisioning land redistribution in postwar Japan, Bunce was doing the same for Korea. He wrote two articles on "The Future of Korea" in which he stressed the need to eliminate "parasitic" landlords and redistribute the land owned by the Oriental Development Company. Rural poverty and tenant uprisings would otherwise result, Bunce warned. After the war, in January 1946, Bunce led a group of American scholars to Korea under the auspices of the

¹³⁸ Mitchell, 59-60; Morrow and Sherper, i-ii; On the Bankhead-Jones Act, see also the Introduction to the present study.

State Department. Bunce's tenure in Korea was to be a long one — after the Korean War he oversaw Economic Cooperation Administration activities in the country — but the purpose of the 1946 Bunce Mission was to advise the military government on land reform. His group wrote the ambitious land reform plan that the U.S.-Korean Joint Committee had then watered down at the request of the legislature only to see the interim legislature reject it anyway.¹³⁹

On April 29, 1949, the new Korean National Assembly voted to pass the new Farmland Reform bill into law and send it to President Syngman Rhee for approval. Yet anti-reform legislators made a last-ditch effort to secure more favorable terms for landowners or to make Rhee veto the bill: they called for landlords to receive 150% of the productive value of land from the government, and for buyers of land to pay the government 125%. (A parcel's productive value was calculated from output records circa 1940, but discounted 40% since yields had decreased during and after the war.) Since there was not enough money in the new Korean government's coffers to compensate landlords at a level above the purchase price, this version of the bill was financially unsupportable. As legislators had hoped, the executive branch under President Syngman Rhee rejected the bill. The legislator then passed again in June in substantially the same form. A standoff ensued that lasted for several months, during which time the National Assembly voted down a revised version of the bill that would have increased the

¹³⁹ Arthur Bunce, "The Future of Korea: Part II," *Far Eastern Survey* 13, no. 10 (May 1944), 85-86. A Korean-language source on Bunce, who is "now almost forgotten" even among Korean scholars, is 안종철, "해방 전후 아더 번스(Arthur C. Bunce)의 활동과 미국의 대한정책," *미국사연구*, 제31집 (May 2010).

purchase price to 150%, thereby making the 150% payments to landlords feasible.¹⁴⁰

USAID's historians Morrow and Sherper interpreted Rhee's rejection of the legislature's bills, which would have compensated landlords at a higher rate than buyers paid for land, as evidence that the landlord-dominated assembly "seemed more liberal" than Rhee; they had passed a bill and Rhee had rejected it. That perception is clearly incorrect. Both Rhee and the legislators were acting in their interests, but Rhee's interests laid with passing a reform and the legislators' with preventing it or maximizing their gains from it. During the standoff Rhee held out for a bill that would be less burdensome for his government in terms of compensating landowners. Scholar Cho Seok Gon has recently shown that the South Korean government under Rhee was all too willing to promote the idea of "land-to-the-tillers," which "became the dominant discourse in the context of national liberation. . . when socialism was widely popular." Cho, however, attributes the "land-to-the-tillers" ethos to "traditional notions of good rulership" and does not explore the role of the United States in prompting Rhee's government to pursue land redistribution.¹⁴¹

After months of debate, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and a legislative subcommittee called the Industry and Labor Committee found common ground. Their proposal abandoned the idea of cash payments to landlords entirely, and envisioned a system in which landlords would receive securities to be redeemed in cash "when the benefitted farmers paid their annual installments." Rhee's administration hoped that

¹⁴⁰ Morrow and Sherper, i-iiii, 23, 28, 31

¹⁴¹ Cho Seok Gon, "A Study on Change in the Subae Nongga at the Time of the South Korean Land Reform," *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 26, no. 1 (June 2013), 76.

landlords would redeem their securities for shares of stock in industrial corporations instead of taking the cash option. A bill to this effect set both purchase and payment price at 150% of production, and finally passed the National Assembly on March 10, 1950.¹⁴²

From the perspective of landowners, the securities system was an improvement over the Japanese policy of paying cash up-front, since in Japan the yen had very quickly lost its value and Korean currency, too, seemed sure to remain weak for the foreseeable future. The securities could have brought landlords' capital out of the village and into the cities by giving them stakes in industrial concerns, but in practice Korean landlords almost always took cash payments rather than accepting stocks as Rhee's government hoped they would. Immediate need and a sense of uncertainty, both caused by the war, may have factored into landlords' decisions in this respect. Unfortunately, the cash value of their securities was less than the black market value of the rice their former fields produced. Regardless of the failure of the Korean securities in practice, subsequent American-backed land reforms would typically use securities rather than cash payments for compensation. Although his Japanese program had been cash-based, reformer-at-large Ladejinsky thereafter became a vocal proponent of securities-based payments to landlords.¹⁴³

However, the terms of payment on the buying side were distinctly more conservative than anything American reformers put forth in countries where they had total or majority control of policy. Tenants had only five years to finish paying for their

¹⁴² See Kim, "South Korea's Land Reform," 56-60 for another thorough discussion of the legislative history of the South Korean land reform.

¹⁴³ Morrow and Sherper, 32, 43-44.

land, a full decade shorter than the fifteen years granted in the 1948 sell-off of New Korea Company lands. The latter redistribution had charged no interest to buyers, but the 1950 law imposed an incredibly high 24% annual accrual. Payment had to be in kind. In 1976 land reform scholar Antonio Ledesma attributed the “fact that most [South Korean] tenant or former tenant farmers are still poor” to the 1950 law’s unforgiving terms of purchase more than to the deferral of its implementation until after the war.¹⁴⁴

Yet Korean landlords had good reason to feel that the law was more in tenants’ favor than their own. 1950’s Revised Farmland Reform Law provided for the purchase and sale of private land in excess of three jeongbo for rice fields; the number varied for dry fields. Non-operating owners — mostly absentee landlords — could retain no land whatsoever, a similarity to the Japanese reform lost later in Taiwan. Owners could own up to three hectares only if they farmed it themselves or with their immediate family. “Tenancy of all types was deemed illegal except for a few minor exceptions,” an even stricter, more sweeping limitation than in the Japanese reform, though the 3-hectare ceiling on paddy land was the same in both countries. Some exceptions were made for government lands, religious lands, research stations, small urban gardens, and other categories. A total of 601,048 private hectares (29% of the country’s total cultivable acreage) were thus subject to redistribution, not counting ex-Japanese lands. Clearly prior American policies, and probably individual American advisers like Bunce and his team, had an influence on the 1950 law’s three-hectare limit and anti-absenteeism. The law’s almost draconian schedule of payments, though, has no close parallel in other American-

¹⁴⁴ Ledesma, 6.

backed land reforms, least of all the one that Mitchell had overseen in Korea two years earlier. Unfortunately for buyers who had received ex-Japanese land under the company's more generous terms, a 1951 decree from Syngman Rhee overrode their agreements and imposed the five-year schedule on them as well. According to USAID analysts Morrow and Sherper, though "most [buyers of company land] had nearly completed their payments" anyway and "the amendment did not affect most purchasers."¹⁴⁵

As in Japan and later in Taiwan, land reform in South Korea was to be carried out by committees at the village, city, and national levels, and tenants on those committees were to have a prominent role in appraising land and resolving disputes. Since the legal framework for the committees and indeed the whole reform were not in place until the spring of 1950, and were not scheduled to begin operations until July 1, "in actual practice the committees did not function due to the exigencies of the Korean War" that broke out on June 25, the day North Korean forces poured across the 38th parallel and threw the continued existence of the South Korean government in doubt.¹⁴⁶

LAND REFORM IN WAR AND AFTERMATH

In the days after the North Korean invasion, the area over which Rhee's government could claim control shrunk to a small perimeter around the southeastern port of Pusan. Only in Kyongsang Namdo, the area around Pusan, did any redistribution take place as scheduled. The fact that it happened anywhere at all under such existentially-troubling circumstances is sufficiently impressive, though not necessarily surprising in

¹⁴⁵ Morrow and Sherper, i-ii, 26, 28-29.

¹⁴⁶ Ledesma, 30.

light of the later history of American-backed land reform; in South Vietnam a decade and a half later, increased conflict actually corresponded with a heightened focus on reform after 1965. Within months of the North Korean invasion, the legal boundary of South Korea was largely reestablished by a massive American and United Nations intervention. Then the boundary was transgressed once again; a deep American push into the north prompted the Chinese to intervene in November 1950. In April 1951 MacArthur, who had promised President Truman the Chinese would not enter the war and was now accusing Truman of mismanagement, was relieved of his command over the United Nations forces in Korea and Japan. General Matthew Ridgway became the new head of the occupation of Japan, but where Japan had been MacArthur's primary focus for the last six years, Ridgway would have to devote the bulk of his attention to the crisis in Korea. United Nations forces pulled back to the legally-recognized boundary that neither North nor South Korea considered legitimate or permanent, and the war settled into a holding pattern under which land reform could be resumed. Land reform committees had begun to function in significant numbers in November, just before the Chinese intervention, and they issued 48,264 bonds to landowners by August 1951. By the following February, 331,776 hectares, over half the projected total, had been distributed and over a million metric tons of rice had been collected in payment.¹⁴⁷

The shooting ended in July 1953, and distribution of land continued over the next several years. By the 1960s most of the targeted land had been distributed, and by 1969 all securities had been redeemed. At that time "69% of all farm families [were] full

¹⁴⁷ Morrow and Sherper, 28-29, 42.

owner operators, 24% [were] part owners, and 7% [were] tenants” of dubious legal status; at the end of World War II the figures had been about 14%, 35%, and 51%. Together the 1948 redistribution of company land and the redistribution of privately-held land under the 1950 Farmland Reform Law had transferred a third of South Korean farmland into new hands and touched the lives of two-thirds of South Korean farm families. (Compare with Armstrong’s slightly higher 70% estimate for the share of North Korean farmers who benefitted from the Soviet-backed land reform.) In South Korea the number of very small farms, which are difficult to mechanize and thus less profitable than large farms, increased, with 44.9% of farms in 1953 being less than .5 hectares compared to 41.2% before land redistribution. Mitchell had foreseen this inefficient fracturing, but had considered it a necessary cost of economic and social equalization.¹⁴⁸

Yet the South Korean land reform is not often considered as successful as the Japanese or Taiwanese reforms. In part this assessment is due to its failure to resolve a refugee crisis exacerbated by the war. Ledesma observed that “disguised tenancy” became a problem in Korea in the 1960s and 1970s as refugees from the north struggled to find work. Since tenancy was legally prohibited, both by the land reform law and by a new constitution in 1962, a kind of illicit sharecropping Ledesma called “*ko-ji*” emerged in which semi-permanent farm laborers “agree to a given set of farm tasks, receiving from the landowner payment in kind, usually rice, prior to the crop season.” From this experience Ledesma concluded that “those at the very bottom of the social pyramid” — namely, refugees — had “to be identified and included in any reform program.”

¹⁴⁸Armstrong, 145; Morrow and Sherper, i-ii, iii, 5, 18.

American land reformers would face refugee crises again in Taiwan and South Vietnam, both of which experienced large refugee influxes around the time of their land reforms. The laws that Americans brought about in those countries included explicit avenues for refugees to purchase farmland expropriated from landlords, but tenants working the land always had right of first refusal. The same had been true in the Korean land reform laws, but the scale of the refugee crisis meant that there were many people who had few opportunities either in cities or in the countryside.¹⁴⁹

Ledesma criticized the South Korean government for neglecting the agricultural sector of its economy by “following a dualistic model of development that is biased toward an export-oriented industrialization program.” Rapid South Korean industrialization and a marked rise in industrial exports is usually associated with Rhee’s successor, Park Chung-hee, who was in power from 1961 to 1979. Ledesma’s criticism runs somewhat counter to his claim that American land reform efforts in Asia were most successful when paired with “vigorous industrialization programs,” as in Japan and Taiwan. Yet Rhee and Park’s administrations may have done too little to extend the benefits of increased industrial output and employment to farm families. A survey conducted from 1954 to 1955 found that “not one of the farmers in 360 farm households had joined an agricultural cooperative organization” and “not one had been reached by the extension service[s]” of the government. This situation could not have been more different from Japan, which enjoyed virtually full farm household membership in a government-affiliated farmers association. No viable, village-level, government-backed

¹⁴⁹ Ledesma, 6.

agricultural bank existed in Korea until the end of the 1950s, and the number of officials working in farm credit offices did not reach wartime levels, when the Japanese had managed Korea's credit infrastructure, until 1962. During the early stages of the land reform, to make their scheduled payments on time many farmers had turned to money lenders or even their former landlords for high-interest loans. The shortage of cheap credit resulted in "heavy agricultural indebtedness" and "loss of illegally mortgaged land to money lenders causing some renewal of tenancy." The *ko-ji* system thus came to include longtime South Korean farmers as well as landless refugees from the north. Without an effort by the government to reach farmers, and with clan- and community-based *kye* too limited in their resources and focus, there were simply too few avenues for farmers to buy and sell agricultural goods and credit at sustainable rates. Rhee and Park's neglect of the rural sector was one reason why, in 1970, Korea's rural incomes were just 40% of urban incomes on average. Similarly, in North Korea "land reform had been explicitly intended, in part, as a means of extracting surplus value from the agricultural sector for North Korea's industrialization."¹⁵⁰

Recently Cho has disagreed with the notion that land reform's benefits redounded mainly to Korea's industrial sector. According to Cho, land reform and its 3-jeongbo cap did, in fact, constitute the "installation of equalitarianism in South Korean society." Even widespread fraud did not negate its rural benefits; from at least 1953 onward, Cho says, recipients of land often resold it illegally. The land reform law, like others in this study, prevented recipients from selling their land for a certain number of years so that landlords

¹⁵⁰ Ledesma, 6, 16; Armstrong, 146; Morrow and Sherper, 32, 34, 50-52, 54-55.

could not simply pressure former tenants into exchanging land rights for cash. Yet in South Korea, despite frequent illegal resales of land “at the time of the land reform. . . ultimately there was little difference between the ‘original recipients’ and ‘the final recipients’ of distributed land in terms of land size and ownership.” Essentially, South Korea’s ex-tenants bought and sold to each other, and the rural class structure remained, in Cho’s words, equalitarian until the government abandoned the 3-jeongbo limit in the mid-1990s.¹⁵¹

Another contemporary scholar, Lee Yong-ki, complicates Cho’s assertion that rural equality was served as well through fraud as it would have been through better enforcement of the law. Lee searches for a “social aspect” to land reform and finds that powerful kinship units controlled the buying and selling of land that took place amidst the land reform. Certain “leading families,” Lee writes, “were better equipped to deal with the rapid changes in the structure of land ownership in the post-liberation period. Without such support networks, the ordinary families had a more difficult time in reaping the benefits of the land reform” and increasingly left the countryside to seek urban employment.¹⁵²

In spite of the movement of some farmers to urban areas, South Korea’s agricultural output grew at an average rate of 5% per year between 1953 and 1965. Crops diversified, with rice falling from 69% of total agricultural product to 46% as “fruits, vegetables, livestock, [and] tobacco” proliferated. New arable land was

¹⁵¹ Cho, 75-6.

¹⁵² Lee Yong-ki, “Taking Another Look at Land Reform in South Korea: A Focus on Kinship Networks,” *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 26, no. 1 (June 2013), 103, 126.

reclaimed, which may have helped the average size of farms increase and the share of half-hectare and smaller farms fall to 35.5% by 1968 after an initial post-redistribution rise to 44.9%. The total number of farms of that size fell, but their proportional decrease had more to do with a sharp increase in the number of 1-2 hectare farms and a presumably illegal increase in farms over 3 hectares. By 1970 members of farm households were earning more from their crops, taking more supplemental off-farm jobs, and spending more of their income on household goods and education than they had prior to the land reform.¹⁵³

Cumings' characterization of American-backed land reform in Korea as benevolently ethnocentric has merit. As in other parts of Asia, American reformers assumed they were helping South Korean farmers out of feudalism and into a more modern relationship with the economy. Interestingly, Armstrong argues that Soviet land reformers in North Korea in the mid-1940s suffered from the same sense of cultural superiority. "No mention of socialism was made during this reform process," he writes.

Reform was portrayed as broad-based and democratic, patriotic and anti-Japanese. Party materials emphasized that 'the current stage of Korean social development is the democratic stage of capitalist production.' Korea was leaving 'feudalism' behind but going in the direction of neither monopoly capitalism nor Soviet-style socialism; instead, land reform was the 'material base for establishing a progressive democratic society.'

The similarity of Soviet rhetoric on land reform in North Korea to American thinking and rhetoric are remarkable, and would surely have surprised American reformers, who condemned Socialist-style land reform in private as well as in public. Yet it is not so

¹⁵³ Morrow and Sherper, 40, 47, 50-52.

surprising when American-backed land reform is viewed not merely as a Cold War story, a defensive and calculating response to Soviet reforms, but as an earnest (if ethnocentric) action oriented toward long-range economic and political agendas that only happened to coincide with Cold War aims.¹⁵⁴

ASSESSING SOUTH KOREA'S REFORM

Scholars have been reluctant to declare the South Korean land reform a success, and indeed its results were mixed and ambiguous. A recent historiographical overview by Cho Seok Gon and Park Tae Gyun summarizes conventional wisdom and its recent challengers. “[A]ssessments of the land reform in South Korea have not been very positive,” they wrote, because it was slow to come about and because it imposed greater costs on poor farmers than the “free” redistribution in the North. Yet where “traditional evaluations of land reform tended to focus on whether or not the distribution of land was free,” newer research has argued that the land reform successfully overturned “the colonial landlord system” and ushered in a regime of independent farmers. As this chapter has shown, that was the goal of American land reformers. To that extent the South Korean reform must take its place alongside Japan as a successful example of the policy.¹⁵⁵

Cho, as stated earlier, has praised the South Korean land reform as a guarantor of rural “equalitarianism,” but his 2013 article also showed that key features of the law were

¹⁵⁴ Armstrong, 81.

¹⁵⁵ Cho Seok Gon and Park Tae Gyun, “Suggestions for New Perspectives on the Land Reform in South Korea,” *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 26, no. 1 (June 2013), 2-5.

ignored by beneficiaries themselves. In another recent article, Kim Seong Bo explains American land redistribution in South Korea in ideological terms. “The U.S. military government sought socioeconomic reforms under the premise of anti-communism,” he writes, but land redistribution also “reflected the traditional American value and conviction that free landowners are the true bastions of liberal democracy.” Those claims are in perfect accord with the conclusions of this study. However, Kim overreaches in attempting to link America’s support of land redistribution to Rhee’s illiberal governance of South Korea. He joins earlier scholars like Bak Myeongnim, and a strain of similar thought in Japanese historiography, in stating that land reform robbed South Korean farmers of their class consciousness and transformed them from activists into supporters of an indifferent conservative regime. “[T]he state replaced landlords and increased its authoritarian influence and control over the rural communities,” Kim writes. That claim is implicitly contested by Kim’s contemporary Cho, who shows just how little the state’s restrictions on hectare limits were observed in South Korean villages, and by Lee Yong-ki, who argues that the state’s power in rural areas was less significant than the power of strong kinship networks and who has “serious doubts. . . that the land reform generated widespread support, on the part of farmers, for the Rhee regime.”¹⁵⁶

Moreover, while American reformers and their allies did hope that land reform would increase rural contentment with non-communist regimes, that contentment had to be earned through actual improvements in farmers’ quality of life. In South Korea, that improvement seems to have happened as intended. Kim admits that “the fact that farmers

¹⁵⁶ Lee, “Taking Another Look,” 105; Kim, “South Korea’s Land Reform,” 47-51.

were liberated from the landlord system. . . creat[ed] a pillar for rural democratization in the long run.” Rather than tricking farmers into supporting a conservative regime, then, the land reform in South Korea convinced most farmers that their needs were being addressed by the existing government, and they “supported the Rhee regime in various elections throughout the 1950s” with eyes wide open. That they did so need not detract from the fact that “their urban counterparts” had much reason to protest and resent Rhee.¹⁵⁷

Kim draws a distinction between the Japanese and Korean reforms that is not borne out by this study. He says that in the case of Japan the United States “was persistent in the matter of rural democratization [while in] South Korea, the frontline of anticommunism, [the Americans] and the Korean right wing were more interested in the establishment of private property rights.” In truth, however, Americans always viewed the maintenance of private property rights as an indispensable part of democratization — they were just highly particular about *whose* private property rights needed to be established, and in both Japan and South Korea the answer was the same: landless tenants. Large landowners in both countries saw their private property rights infringed upon by American reformers, though the reformers would hasten to point out that landlords received at least nominal compensation for their expropriated acreage. Another point in contrast to Kim’s argument is that prior to the Korean War, South Korea was not the “frontline of anticommunism” in the minds of American policymakers — not if “frontline” is defined as a place where Americans thought they might need to fight.

¹⁵⁷ Kim, “South Korea’s Land Reform,” 47-51.

Rather, it was Japan that the United States intended to defend, and high-ranking U.S. officials hoped that South Korea would be able to defend itself in the unlikely event of aggression from the North. Kim's article is one of the few recent scholarly treatments of Asian land reforms that features a comparative analysis, but his attempt to show a marked difference of approach between two near-simultaneous examples of American-designed reform is contradicted by the findings of the present study.¹⁵⁸

As was the case nearly everywhere in the world, agricultural productivity rose in Korea in the 1950s and 1960s. It rose right away on ex-Japanese land (perhaps, said Morrow and Sherper, due to Korean farmers producing intentionally low yields in the period of Japanese ownership), and increased across the board during the next couple of decades. As always, it is difficult to assign the credit for the increase to land reform, since dramatic technological changes followed close on its heels: after 1955 Korean farmers began using more fertilizers, pesticides, and irrigation systems than ever before, even more than in the late 1930s when the Japanese had provided substantial inputs to drive up grain production, and consumption spiked again in the 1960s when credit finally became accessible to many. Yet many economists criticize land reform for exacerbating the problem of small, inefficient, highly-fragmented plots. The director of the New Korea Company himself was sympathetic to that line of criticism, but felt the political importance of land reform keenly and adjudged it the more important short-term consideration. The most that can be said with certainty is that land redistribution in South

¹⁵⁸ James Matray, "Dean Acheson's Press Club Speech Reexamined," *The Journal of Conflict Studies* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2002).

Korea did not prevent development of agriculture, and it successfully brought about greater equalization of landownership in the country despite the outbreak of war.¹⁵⁹

In Korea, the need to prevent communist promises of social and economic liberation from appealing to landless farmers prompted Americans to push for redistribution over the objections of their mostly well-connected South Korean colleagues at all levels of administration. Syngman Rhee himself, though no great friend to farmers in terms of providing services, pursued redistribution before, during, and after the Korean War. On the termination of direct American military government in Korea, Rhee's executive branch hammered out a workable land reform program modeled on earlier American policies, but with a far stricter schedule of payments for buyers. Rhee could have lightened the load on buyers by decree, especially as his authority increased during and after the war, but it is to his credit that during the tense intra-governmental debates of 1948 and 1949 he did not give in to the demands of conservative legislators to nearly double the price of land. Rhee himself issued the decrees in February, March, and April of 1950 that set the timetable for the land reform and established the local committees to carry it out. If some of his later decrees were prejudicial to buyer interests, and if he gave little attention to rural development compared to urban, his government at least did not stop the process of redistribution the way Ngo Dinh Diem's government did in South Vietnam in the late 1950s. Both Rhee and Diem had to at least appear to compete with the sweeping (and, among tenants, popular) communist reforms along their northern borders, but even during war South Korean reform never ground to a halt the way Vietnam's

¹⁵⁹ Morrow and Sherper, 33, 45.

did.¹⁶⁰

American bureaucrats working in the context of military occupation sought long-term stability and growth through farmland redistribution — a redistribution that encouraged private ownership and carried at least a nominal price tag for buyers. American support for land redistribution would not slacken as the Cold War heated up in the later 1950s and 1960s. Yet after Japan and South Korea, American reformers would no longer have the benefit of direct military occupation and could not always control reforms to the degree they might have wished.

¹⁶⁰ Morrow and Sherper, 24-25, 28; See chapter 6 of the present study for more on Vietnam.

Chapter 4: Taiwan: Reform as Collaboration

INTRODUCTION

In 1948 the China Aid Act established the Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction (JCRR) in an effort to improve conditions for Chinese farmers and reduce the appeal of the communist insurgency in the Chinese countryside. The American government believed that land reform was an essential part of a nation's economic and political growth, and it hoped to repeat in the Republic of China the kind of land redistribution recently carried out in Japan. In August 1949, with the “loss” of China imminent, the JCRR and Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist government moved across the Taiwan Strait and continued to reshape agriculture in Taiwan. The JCRR's major achievement was a land-to-the-tiller law that profoundly altered rural conditions in Taiwan. Scholars, especially economists, then tried to determine whether the land reform had worked as intended. Their studies were inconclusive, but raised big questions about some of the basic assumptions that motivated American reformers and their allies.

Nationalist China was the first place American land reformers worked to create redistribution in a country not under their direct control. As such, the experience of the JCRR has not been seen as part of America’s larger land reform agenda, but only as a defensive effort by Chiang Kai-shek. In 1948, the year before the Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction (JCRR) came into existence, Taiwan’s average per-hectare rice yield was 3894 kilograms. In 1955, after the JCRR’s land reform was largely complete, that number was up to 5472 kilograms. Clearly land reform did not stop the growth of agriculture, but little else is clear about the relationship between the two. Mostly working

in the two decades following the land reform, economists amassed an impressive amount of data on Taiwan's farm households but struggled to isolate land reform from other, contemporaneous agents of change. Historians, meanwhile, searched beyond land reform for preexisting conditions conducive to economic growth. While most of this good, detailed work is now quite dated, a rediscovery of it has the potential to change our view of the U.S. government's ideological orientation and to reveal unexpected links between U.S. foreign aid policy and classical political and economic theories.¹⁶¹

A LATE START: THE JCRR IN CHINA, OCTOBER 1948-AUGUST 1949

In the Republic of China, the JCRR was an extension of this long history and of the United States' commitment to land reform. Financed by the China Aid Act of April 1948 and first convened in Nanjing on October 1 of that year, the JCRR was staffed with presidential appointees from both Harry Truman and his counterpart, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek. The commission operated in mainland China for less than a year, but during that time its five ruling commissioners — three Chinese men educated in the United States and two American men who had worked in China — determined that their

¹⁶¹ Joseph Yager, *Transforming Agriculture in Taiwan: The Experience of the Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 119. The work of scholars Yager, Kang Chao, Stephen Cheung, Anthony Koo, Al McCoy, and Martin Yang will be treated in some detail. A useful gloss on the subject is Yu-Kang Mao's "Land Reform and Agricultural Development in Taiwan" in *Agricultural Development in China, Japan and Korea* edited by Chi-ming Hou. See also the English-language work by JCRR cofounder T. H. Shen called *Agricultural Development on Taiwan since World War II*. In analyzing the actions of the Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction I draw heavily on archival material. I use the Wade-Giles transliteration system for most Chinese names, since the names of 1950s politicians like Chiang Kai-shek are most familiar in that form. Also, the Chinese scholars of the 1960s and 1970s who figure here still used that system. However, the names of cities and provinces that have become more familiar in Pinyin are given here in that system unless quoted from another source. Citations of primary documents give names as they appear on the documents, even if they contain exotic or erroneous formulations. Taiwan, of course, was often called Formosa by historical actors, so both names for the island appear here.

foremost priority must be land reform. This they defined as an improvement in rental and tenure agreements for tenants and a reduction in the number of tenants and landlords by moving the latter out of agriculture and the former into landownership.¹⁶²

Historian Al McCoy argued in 1970 that America's commitment to land reform was lately come by. Although in previous years the United States had shown itself eager to redistribute farmland to Filipino, Japanese, and Korean tenant farmers, albeit with mixed results, in the case of China McCoy is largely correct. U.S.-based organizations pushing for rural reform in China between the late 1920s and the late 1940s included the Rockefeller Foundation and Christian missions, but among the "several hundred rural reform programs on the mainland since the late 1920s, only a handful dealt with the basic problems of tenancy." During the whole period of Nationalist rule in China (1928-1949) "there was no transformation in the system of property" and land redistribution "was never even considered" by non-communist actors until the JCRR arrived in the country, said McCoy. This is an exaggeration; though he died in 1925 no less a figure than Republic of China founder Sun Yat-sen was a well-known land reform advocate, and from 1941 to 1947 the Nationalist government experimented with compulsory transfers of farmland from landlords to tenants in "a few localities" in five prefectures. About 62,000 hectares of land were transferred to over 63,000 households during that time. Yet it is true that with its bilateral mandate and access to U.S. government funds, the JCRR

¹⁶² Wolf Ladejinsky, "Rural Reconstruction Under the China Aid Act," *Foreign Agriculture* XIV, no. 8 (August 1950), 167; Yager, 2.

would go beyond the efforts of the Nationalists and of “long-time missionaries and China hands” to bring about “a massive redistribution of land.”¹⁶³

The JCRR nominally fell under the authority of the United States' Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA), but in practice its commissioners had *carte blanche* to manage Chinese agricultural development. The ECA's attention was devoted almost entirely to the Marshall Plan, an effort to rejuvenate war-ravaged Europe, although the plan's namesake General George Marshall was an early, enthusiastic backer of the JCRR. So was Truman; he offered to put the entirety of the China Aid Act's \$318 million budget at the commission's disposal, but the commissioner he spoke with said that they could operate on just a tenth of that. On the China side, the JCRR's charter encouraged the commissioners to have their decisions approved by the Chinese government “if the Commission or its chairman. . . deems it necessary.” Apparently they never did, perhaps because the commissioners were an “unusually happy” blend of “close friends” and old classmates who nearly always reached unanimous approval before taking action.¹⁶⁴

Truman picked the two American commissioners on the advice of Republican congressman and hawkish Chinese Nationalist advocate Walter Judd. Judd's recommendations were Dr. Raymond Moyer, a Department of Agriculture official who had spent almost 18 years in China, and John Baker, a “no-nonsense executive” skilled at turning general principles into specific action. Congressman Judd also telephoned Madame Chiang, the English-speaking wife of President Chiang Kai-shek, to put forth

¹⁶³ Stephen Cheung, *The Theory of Share Tenancy: With Special Application to Asian Agriculture and the First Phase of Taiwan Land Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 10; Al McCoy, 24; Yager, 99-101.

¹⁶⁴ Yager, 1, 9-13, 22-23.

the name of lobbyist and activist James Yen for one of the Chinese spots on the commission. President Chiang appointed Yen and also Dr. T.H. Shen, a Cornell-trained food scientist who was “more at home on a farm than in an office.” It was President Chiang as well who named the commission's first chairman, Chiang Monlin, a university administrator “from the same part of Chekiang Province” as himself and who may have been a distant relative. Once the commission's staff was in place, they operated essentially autonomously and with ample American financial backing.¹⁶⁵

In June 1949 the commissioners agreed on a list of “the most important problems” in rural China. The most important, they agreed, was the need to reduce rents and increase security of tenure for Chinese farmers. Other areas of focus included farm credit, livestock health, irrigation, fertilization, and rural literacy, but tenure reform was the overriding and prerequisite objective. Ladejinsky, preeminent advocate of land redistribution, advised the JCRR. Without land reform, Ladejinsky warned the commission, any benefits from technical improvements would accrue mainly to wealthy landlords rather than to the intended beneficiaries, the rural majority. Commissioner Moyer wanted to respond to the “felt needs” of China’s farmers. Chairman Chiang Monlin gave the same principle a more negative phrasing when he said that policies opposed by farmers “cannot be imposed upon them.” What farmers wanted was greater

¹⁶⁵ Yager, 1, 9-13, 22-23.

control of the land they worked, and the commission enthusiastically pursued that objective.¹⁶⁶

The Americans in the JCRR exerted a strong influence over an overwhelmingly Chinese staff. At any given time, the five administrators oversaw around 200 employees, only about a dozen of whom were Americans. According to Ladejinsky, who authored much of the Japanese land reform program of 1946-48 and turned down a high position in the JCRR in order to stay in Tokyo, the commission's policy was "to hire American technicians only when absolutely necessary." The commission's publicity pamphlet bragged that "no American is ever employed if a Chinese technician, whether in the JCRR or government, is qualified to carry out the work." When Americans were hired, their primary purpose was to train and consult the Chinese members, and in this way American policies were woven into the commission's fabric. The reliance on Chinese staff to carry out these policies had several advantages from the American government's perspective; by working behind the scenes it could reduce criticism in the case of project failures, and could credit successes to Kai-shek's Nationalist government in order to generate support for the regime. There was also a belief among American reformers that the success of agricultural policies depended partly on popular support, and that farmers would more readily support a measure that seemed to come from their own government than from a foreign power. They desired to avoid as much as possible communist allegations of imperialism. Moreover, because funding for the JCRR came from the U.S.

¹⁶⁶ Ladejinsky, "Rural Reconstruction Under the China Aid Act," 168-69; "The Program of the Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction One Year After the Commission's Organization, November 1, 1949, Sumner Papers box 3, HSTL, 2; Yager, 12-14.

government (the expense being partly offset by sales of goods to China under the China Aid Act), the U.S. had sufficient leverage in the commission without contributing large numbers of personnel.¹⁶⁷

The people whom Washington did send to the commission were highly experienced in conducting Asian land reforms. Among them were Raymond Davis, who joined the commission in 1952 and who had directed the Agriculture Division of the U.S. occupation government's General Headquarters during the Japanese land reform. Another, William H. Fippin, had worked on the South Korean land reform. Arthur Raper, an agricultural consultant in Japan from 1947 to 1949, was an observer in charge of evaluating the JCRR's progress. Ladejinsky remained in close contact with JCRR and publicized its achievements.¹⁶⁸

The JCRR selected rural improvement projects and provided technical and financial support, but it was not the chief agent of implementation. The task of carrying out the commission's policies fell to Nationalist government agencies, local governments, and private organizations. Most JCRR projects began as proposals by a particular province's bureau of food or department of agriculture. When the JCRR approved a project, the requesting agency itself carried it out, contributed to the cost, and submitted mandatory monthly progress reports. At times, over half of the JCRR's disbursed funds went to local-level agencies and semi-private groups like farmers' associations rather than

¹⁶⁷ Ladejinsky, "Rural Reconstruction," 170, 172; JCRR, "The Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction in China: Its Policies, Procedures and Program," June 1953, U.S. President's Citizen Advisers on the Mutual Security Program Records 1956-57 (hereafter Fairless Committee Records) box 14, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library (hereafter DDEL), 11; McCoy, 24.

¹⁶⁸ McCoy, 24-25.

to the upper levels of the Chinese government. Responsibility was thus widely dispersed, with virtually all levels of government and many powerful private groups having stakes in the success of JCRR projects.¹⁶⁹

In the case of land reform, however, the commission itself was the progenitor of the policy, not just its overseer and financier. Its earliest land reform efforts showed promise even as the situation in China deteriorated. Ladejinsky, whose extensive writings on land reform are characterized by a tendency toward pessimism, reported an “enthusiastic reception” to a land reform effort in Longyan, Fujian province. In late 1949, the commission reported that it had lowered rents for 15 million farmers in the provinces of Guangxi, Guizhou, Sichuan, and Formosa. At least one scholar put the figure at over 17 million and noted that the commission's workforce of investigators and field workers numbered 144,000. Such numbers, even if exaggerated, indicate a serious attempt to create and enforce reforms. It must be remembered, though, that the JCRR's achievements on the mainland were not long-lasting, since the commission fled to Taiwan before it was a year old. Ladejinsky estimated the cost of the commission's programs on the mainland, and thus the cost to the U.S. taxpayer, at about a dime per Chinese farm household affected. This money had been spent mainly on “publicity materials” and on the salaries of the project supervisors and land registrars. In its

¹⁶⁹ Ladejinsky, “Rural Reconstruction,” 171; International Cooperation Administration, Mutual Security Mission to China, “Economic Development on Taiwan, 1951-1955,” January 1956, Fairless Committee Records box 14, DDEL, 26.

publicity pamphlets the commission often touted the low cost of land reform relative to programs like irrigation expansion and health improvement.¹⁷⁰

Prevailing economic conditions, as much as the intrinsically low cost of the programs, kept the JCRR's financial outlay modest. In principle the China Aid Act provided the commission with more money than it required. In practice, the U.S. government disbursed this money through the ECA to the Chinese government, which deposited it into Chinese bank accounts that the JCRR could draw on. The problem with this system was that severe inflation in China diminished the value of the money as soon as it was converted from American dollars into Chinese currency. Moreover, banks regularly ran out of currency and bank notes, and the JCRR had to await shipments of money by boat. One such shipment weighed a ton. The difficulty of acquiring the money to which it was entitled meant that the JCRR spent only about 25% of the amount it hoped to spend during its period of operation on the mainland.¹⁷¹

The expansion of communist-controlled areas hampered and ultimately ended JCRR efforts in mainland China, but a radical proposal by the American commissioners raised the possibility of a very different outcome. Commissioner Moyer knew that the JCRR's mission "as adopted at the beginning could not influence the situation significantly within the time which we foresaw would be allowed." Yet rather than abandon the mission on the mainland, Moyer thought the JCRR could work with the new

¹⁷⁰ Martin M.C. Yang, *Socio-Economic Results of Land Reform in Taiwan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1967), 50; "The Program of the Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction One Year After," 3, 5, 14; Ladejinsky, "Rural Reconstruction," 169; Wolf Ladejinsky to Chiang Mon-lin, November 7, 1949, Sumner Papers box 3, HSTL, 30.

¹⁷¹ Yager, 30-31, 33-34.

communist government. In late January 1949 Moyer, his fellow American commissioner Baker, and an agricultural attaché at the U.S. embassy wrote to the ECA recommending that JCRR projects continue “under an agreement with the new regime.” It did not happen; Truman and his cabinet had decided days earlier not to carry out ECA activities in communist-controlled areas.¹⁷²

The fact that such a proposal was made at all suggests important facts about American land reformers in Asia. The architects of land reform tended to be vocally anti-communist, but most were also economically-minded pragmatists. Moyer thought that the communists might “desire assistance in building up a sound and strong program in agricultural production.” He and his American colleagues believed that the material benefits of JCRR programs were important enough to carry out under any polity, even one whose legitimacy the American government did not acknowledge. As for the three Chinese commissioners, there is no evidence that any of them made similar recommendations to their government. Presumably they knew that there was no chance the Nationalist government would agree to cooperate with their longtime foes, the communists. Although the Truman administration opted against collaboration as well, this was not the only instance in which American land reform advocates showed greater political flexibility than their Asian counterparts. Almost simultaneously in South Korea, the Korean staff of an American land reform agency wanted to screen tenants for communist sympathies before selling them land. The agency’s administrator, Clyde Mitchell, countered that “communist sympathy” was too difficult to prove and that the

¹⁷² Yager, 29-30.

only qualification for receiving land should be the ability to work it and pay for it. American land reformers in Asia were on the front lines of counterinsurgency, but they tended to look beyond the immediate political conflict toward long-term development goals.¹⁷³

In its brief time on the mainland, the JCRR successfully exhibited that rent reduction and land redistribution were high priorities. After its removal to Taiwan in August 1949, instead of consolidating the last-ditch Nationalist stronghold by shoring up the existing social and economic structure, the JCRR continued to try to remake the foundations of agriculture and society.¹⁷⁴

THE JCRR IN TAIWAN: LAND REFORM IN THREE STEPS

Between the 1630s and 1650s, the united Dutch East India Company acted as landlord of all Taiwan. In areas near company outposts, its officials induced Chinese immigrants to cultivate profitable goods like sugar and rice in exchange for private property rights. The company influenced the crops that were grown, but in most cases allowed its farmers to keep or sell their plots as they pleased. The company tried to keep Chinese farmers out of aboriginal areas where the Dutch attitude toward land was more feudal. Treaties with aboriginal communities established the company as “lord” and the aborigines as “vassals,” which in practice meant that the Dutch could not sell aboriginal land but could impose great demands on aboriginal communities. For half a decade the company collected hefty tributes in rice from aboriginal farm families. When a Ming dynasty

¹⁷³ Yager, 30; Mitchell, 59.

¹⁷⁴ “The Program of the Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction One Year After,” 4

(1368-1644) loyalist named Coxinga drove the Dutch out of Taiwan in 1662, his government in turn claimed sole ownership of the island's farmland. Coxinga hoped to use Taiwan as a base of operations to reconquer the mainland from the ascendant Qing dynasty (1644-1912), but died with this ambition unrealized. The Qing divested itself of most of Taiwan's land when it took control of the island in 1683. In this Qing land reform, numerous wealthy "chiefs" acquired parcels of land and hired yet more immigrants from the mainland to work them. As the island's population grew and its land rose in value, subleasing became commonplace, and in Taiwan's villages a hierarchical structure of owners, nominal tenants, and subtenant laborers emerged. Japan seized the island in 1895 and compelled many longtime owners to sell their plots to their ostensible tenants, but the effect was simply to remove the top layer of the hierarchy. When the island reverted to China in 1945 after the defeat of Japan, Chiang's Nationalist forces attempted to end black market trade, civil unrest, and communist agitation through force rather than reform. The Nationalists' political purges and a massacre they perpetrated in February 1947 killed thousands or tens of thousands of Taiwanese residents. In the midst of this bad governance, landlordism and tenancy continued to dominate the island's agriculture, and still did so when the seat of the Nationalist government and the JCRR arrived in 1949.¹⁷⁵

Even before the retreat of the JCRR and the Nationalist government across the strait, Taiwan had received a substantial amount of the commission's attention and

¹⁷⁵ Tonio Andrade, *How Taiwan Became Chinese: Dutch, Spanish, and Han Colonization in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), see chapters 6 and 9; Yang, 5-9.

resources. Between the autumn of 1948 and the spring of 1950 the commission received a total of 1178 project proposals and approved just 297 for action. Formosa, one province out of thirty-five, accounted for 429 of the proposals (over 36% of the total) and 102 of the approvals (over 34% of the total). The reason for the imbalance was that the increasingly dominant position of the Chinese communists made American and Nationalist operations unfeasible in many parts of the mainland. JCRR commissioners understood from the outset that their position in China was tenuous, and that the island of Formosa was the province “least likely to be disturbed in the immediate future.”¹⁷⁶

In January 1949 Chiang Kai-shek selected his friend Chen Cheng to be the governor of Taiwan province. Chen was a career military man, one of a cohort of Whampoa Military Academy graduates who attended the school in the 1920s when Chiang was its commandant. Chen became close to Chiang, even acquiring the nickname “Little Generalissimo” as a result of the association, and rose to a high rank in the Nationalist military and government. Despite Chen's privileged position, he took a remarkably close interest in the conditions of farmers. In 1961, while serving as Premier of the Republic of China, he wrote the book that is still the definitive history of Taiwanese land reform. As he remembered, when he became governor in 1949 “the morale of the people on Taiwan was low, economic confusion and social unrest were rampant, and it looked as though anything might happen. To safeguard the island as a base of operations. . . we required social stability.” Since for three-fifths of the island's population agriculture was the basis of life and livelihood, this social stability “could take

¹⁷⁶ Ladejinsky, “Rural Reconstruction”, 169; Yang, 51-52.

place only through land reform.” The fear of a communist invasion with the support of Taiwan's dissatisfied farmers loomed over Governor Chen, but he also emphasized the economic rationale for the program. Prevailing theory held that if farmers controlled their own means of production then agricultural output would increase and sustain a growing industrial workforce. At the same time, non-producing landlords would have to redirect their capital investments to non-farm sectors. “Capital investment in land and the exploitation of human labor constitute great impediments to such development,” Chen wrote, and for Taiwan to become powerful it had to “begin by setting capital and labor free through land reform.”¹⁷⁷

In 1949 the amount of arable land in Taiwan was roughly two million acres. Paddy land made up 61% of the total, and dry fields of sweet potato, jute, sugarcane, tea leaves, peanuts, and tropical fruits made up the remainder. Most of the farmland, and the best of it, lay in the island's western plains, away from the more mountainous east. Sharing this land was a farm population of about 4.5 million people in 665,134 households, over half of the island's 8 million total residents. As in other parts of Asia with large rural populations and relatively little arable land, small farms were the rule, with 85% measuring five acres or less. About half of Taiwan's farmland was cultivated all or in part by tenants. Slightly over half of all farmers, 57%, owned either part or all of the land they cultivated, with full-time tenants and laborers making up the rest. A majority of Taiwanese peasants paid around 50% of their crop yields as rent, but some

¹⁷⁷ Chen Cheng, *Land Reform in Taiwan* (Taiwan: China Publishing Company, 1961), ix-x.

paid as much as 70%. All together the island's farmers produced 1,420,000 metric tons of rice in 1950.¹⁷⁸

Land reform in Taiwan was a clearly-delineated three step process. In Japan it had happened all at once, and Ladejinsky recommended to the JCRR that they follow suit. However, in this instance the preference of the Chinese government seems to have won out; for maximum political impact officials preferred to separate the reform into steps. The first step addressed the high cost of rent. Even before the commission arrived from the mainland, Governor Chen declared his intention to cap rents at 37.5% of the value of the main crop. This figure was derived by setting 25% of the harvest as a baseline income for the tenant and halving the remaining 75% between tenant and landlord. In recognition of the very rare cases in which rent was already under the cap, rents below 37.5% were to be frozen. Up-front payment of rent was prohibited, and leases were required to be put in writing and to provide security of tenure for at least six years with an option for renewal. Security deposits or "key money" that tenants paid at the beginning of a period of lease were legally defined as part of rent, and were capped, so that landlords could not simply increase charges elsewhere in response to the loss of rental revenue. For the same reason, landlords were barred from requiring tenants to pay for the cost of seeds, fertilizers, and equipment if the landlords had supplied these things previously. This rent reduction law, later referred to in a JCRR publication as the "first

¹⁷⁸ International Cooperation Administration, "Economic Development on Taiwan," 30; JCRR, "The Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction in China, 30; American Embassy, Taipei, "Taiwan," January 10, 1957, Fairless Committee Records box 14, DDEL, 12-13; JCRR, Information Office, "Land-to-the-Tiller," December, 1956, Fairless Committee Records box 14, DDEL, 4; Hui-sun Tang, "Land Reform in Formosa," November 1954, Fairless Committee Records box 14, DDEL; Tang, 214.

step” of land reform in Formosa, went into effect in the late summer of 1949 with the first rice harvest of the year. Its implementation cost the commission \$40,000 in publication and inspection costs, and the commission estimated that 300,000 tenants benefited from lower rents as a result.¹⁷⁹

However, when the JCRR arrived in Taiwan and began to investigate more closely, it found that the rent reduction law had failed to meet its objectives in several ways. At harvest time the commission sent “126 county workers and 26 provincial inspectors” to judge the law's success in selected communities. They found, first, that as many as 10,000 landlords had chosen to evict their tenants and farm their land themselves rather than make do with the lower rental incomes. Second, some tenants had sublet their land to others and were receiving the legal protection of tenants while acting as landlords. A number of these middlemen tenants were charging rents above the legal maximum and splitting the difference with their original landlords, the owners of record. Third, the inspection team found an “alarmingly great” number of disputes over rent even though the law had been “widely publicized in every town and village.” These disputes occurred on as many as one in ten tenanted farms. The two most common kinds of disagreements involved “black-market rent,” in which landlords continued to set rent at now-illegal rates, and arguments over the value of crops that determined the appropriate rent. The first two problems strongly influenced the commission's subsequent land laws, which

¹⁷⁹ International Cooperation Administration, “Economic Development on Taiwan,” 30; JCRR, “The Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction in China,” 29; Publishers of Taiwan Pictorial, “Taiwan: Land of Progress,” 1956, Fairless Committee Records box 14, DDEL, 23; Cheung, 90, 92-93; Yang, 39; Chen, 9; Yager, 102.

would include mandatory six-year minimums on leases and would prohibit the resale of land for a period of time after purchase. The third problem, the large number of landlords not in compliance with the new rental restrictions, prompted an enormous increase in the scale of the commission itself. The JCRR and the Provincial Land Bureau added over 7000 new full-time employees and expanded their coverage from a few sample villages to the entire island. The bureau acted as arbiter of disputes. In this way, said one chronicler, “most of the illegal practices were soon suppressed.”¹⁸⁰

In its reports on the successes and failings of “step one,” the commission noted that the surest way to elevate the conditions of Taiwan's farmers was to limit the amount of land that could be owned and leased. A U.S. government publication explained that “in countries such as Free China where land is scarce, it is only by government intervention that. . . the social stability which results from a high proportion of the farmers owning the land they till” could be realized. In other words, land redistribution was a fundamental requirement of rural reform in Taiwan.¹⁸¹

Between 1950, its first full year on the island, and 1952, the JCRR laid the groundwork for a broader land reform program. It sponsored an island-wide inventory of farmland listing each plot's size, use, and quality on a scale of 26 grades, as well as its ownership status. Commission staffers also trained the employees of the Provincial Land

¹⁸⁰ Hui-sun Tang, “The Rent Reduction and Land Program in Formosa” in *Land Tenure*, 217; International Cooperation Administration, “Economic Development on Taiwan,” 30; JCRR, “The Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction in China, 29; Publishers of Taiwan Pictorial, “Taiwan: Land of Progress,” 1956, Fairless Committee Records box 14, DDEL, 23; Cheung, 95-97.

¹⁸¹ International Cooperation Administration, “Economic Development on Taiwan,” 30; JCRR, “The Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction in China, 29; Publishers of Taiwan Pictorial, “Taiwan: Land of Progress,” 1956, Fairless Committee Records box 14, DDEL, 23.

Administration, the agency that would oversee the land reform at the national level. At the local level, the JCRR provided training for the “29,000 local committee members and helpers” who sat on the farm tenancy committees in every village and city in Taiwan.¹⁸²

These local committees dated to the time of the rent reduction law, passed before the JCRR moved to Taiwan in August 1949, but at first their structure favored landlords. The original committees had up to twenty members, only two of whom were tenants. Landlords’ control of the committees, which were supposed to help enforce rent reduction, might have increased instances of non-compliance with the law. When Wolf Ladejinsky visited Taiwan in September 1949, he observed that these committees were far more conservative than the ones he had designed for the Japanese program. On his advice, a 1952 law changed the committees’ structure to give tenants a plurality with five of eleven seats. The remainder were split between landlords (two seats), owner-farmers (two seats), and the chairmen of the local farmers’ association and the local government’s land affairs officer. During 1952 each municipality held elections to fill the new committees with a mix of tenants, landlords, and independent owner-operators in about the same mix as the committees that had overseen the land reform in occupied Japan between 1946 and 1948.¹⁸³

¹⁸² Anthony Y.C. Koo, “Land Reform in Taiwan” in *Land Reform in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan*. (U.S. Agency for International Development, 1970), 26; International Cooperation Administration, “Economic Development on Taiwan,” 30; JCRR, “The Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction in China, 30; American Embassy, Taipei, “Taiwan,” January 10, 1957, Fairless Committee Records box 14, DDEL, 12-13; JCRR, Information Office, “Land-to-the-Tiller,” December, 1956, Fairless Committee Records box 14, DDEL, 4; Hui-sun Tang, “Land Reform in Formosa,” November 1954, Fairless Committee Records box 14, DDEL.

¹⁸³ Yager, 106; Ledesma, 31.

“Step two” of the JCRR program was the sale of government-owned land. Land that until 1945 had been owned by Japanese agencies, businesses, or individuals, roughly 20% of the island's total agricultural acreage, was now in the hands of the Nationalist government. The government-owned sugar corporation employed farmhands to work over half of it, and long-term tenants leased the rest at a comparatively low rental rate of 25% of the value of the crop. Step two of the land reform program put a third of these lands, about 65,000 hectares, on sale beginning in 1951. Only “tenants and farm laborers actually working the land” were eligible to buy during the initial sale. The price of a plot was set at two and a half times the annual value of the main crop, a significant amount even considering that buyers had a period of ten years in which to make the payments and could receive special dispensation in the event of natural disasters. Still, by mid-1953 the second phase of Taiwanese land reform had resulted in the sale of over 60,000 hectares. By the end of the sell-off, a Taiwanese publication estimated that about 122,000 families, 17% of the island's farm households, had become full or part-owners of the land they worked as a result of this portion of the program.¹⁸⁴

Farmers expressed concerns about the quality of land available for purchase. The government-controlled Taiwan Sugar Corporation owned some of the best farmland in Taiwan, producing 650,000 metric tons of refined sugar in 1950, much of it for export. At first the sell-off was not to include many of the most fertile sugarcane fields. Farmers wanted that land, and believed that they could produce more cane than the Sugar

¹⁸⁴ JCRR, “The Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction in China, 57; Publishers of Taiwan Pictorial, “Taiwan: Land of Progress,” 23-25; American Embassy, Taipei, “Taiwan,” 12; Hui-sun Tang, “Land Reform in Formosa,” November 1954, Fairless Committee Records box 14, DDEL; Yager, 109.

Corporation if the government would give them the same land and the same subsidies. They detected a double-standard in the way the government hoarded its best land while asking private owners to relinquish a certain amount of theirs irrespective of quality. The corporation, for its part, argued that a wholesale turnover of its lands could precipitate a drop in production and leave the industry “crippled.” Since sugar was the island’s most valuable product, a reduction in yield could have disastrous consequences for the whole economy. The corporation agreed to sell just 1700 of its roughly 101,520 hectares. The JCRR wanted to sell more, but the law authorizing the sale had to pass through the Nationalist legislature, where the Sugar Corporation had many allies.¹⁸⁵

Once again, Wolf Ladejinsky’s intervention helped to decide the issue. The JCRR had former governor Chen Cheng, now prime minister, invite Ladejinsky to Taiwan to give his advice. As usual, Ladejinsky sided with tenants. He wanted more public land, including more Sugar Corporation land, included in the sell-off. Overriding the Nationalist legislature’s pro-corporation stance, Prime Minister Chen “unilaterally announced that the sales program would be revised.” The corporation was compelled to part with almost 30,000 additional hectares of its high-quality land. Even still, this was less than Ladejinsky, the JCRR, and Chen would have preferred. On this matter, even their great influence and their U.S. government affiliations could not completely overpower Taiwan’s most powerful corporate interest, provider of the island’s most profitable export. More tenanted Sugar Corporation land eventually went on sale in two

¹⁸⁵ Arthur Raper, “Attitudes of Farm People to the Land Reform in Taiwan,” Fairless Committee Records box 14, DDEL, 4-5; Yager, 108; Tang, 214.

batches, one in 1953 and one in 1958, but this was after the main thrust of the land reform was complete.¹⁸⁶

Step three, the final stage and the “core of the program” in American eyes, was the transfer of privately-owned farms from landlords to tenants. In January 1953 Taiwan's legislature passed the JCRR's Land to the Tiller Law. When the law took effect in February, three chia (about 7.2 acres; one chia is 2.3968 acres) was the most paddy land that a non-cultivating owner could legally retain. The amount was six chia (14.4 acres) in the case of dry fields. Owner-cultivators, those who farmed all their land themselves and with their “immediate” family members, were subject to no acreage restrictions. In 1949 the average size of a Taiwan farm was 1.66 chia (3.98 acres), down from around 2 chia (4.8 acres) a decade previously, so the establishment of a maximum retention amount above that was generous. In the case of rice land, however, it was virtually identical to the retention rate in the Japanese program, which was an average of 3 chō in most of the country (a chō is 2.451 acres). But in Taiwan the chia limit applied to non-cultivating landowners, who in the case of Japan were not allowed to retain any land whatsoever. This important distinction marks the Taiwanese land reform as the weaker of the two.¹⁸⁷

As was the case in Japan in 1946, the subcommittee meetings and floor debates that preceded the law's passage were mere formalities, and the legislature did not substantially alter the law that American reformers had introduced. This was not for lack

¹⁸⁶ Chen, 64; Yager, 108-9.

¹⁸⁷ JCRR, “The Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction in China, 57; Publishers of Taiwan Pictorial, “Taiwan: Land of Progress,” 23-25; American Embassy, Taipei, “Taiwan,” 12; JCRR, Information Office, “Land-to-the-Tiller,” 6; Chen, 69-71; Koo, 7.

of trying. The legislature hoped to weaken the JCRR plan with a higher retention limit and various exemptions that would have protected landlords, and this time it took President Chiang himself to keep the legislature in line. He called two emergency meetings, one in July 1952 and the other in January 1953, to set a deadline for the law's passage and to prohibit the legislature's proposed exemptions to it. Chiang also declared that all Nationalist party members had to abide by his decisions on this matter.¹⁸⁸

The political process in Taiwan was murkier than that which had existed in occupied Japan, where policy decisions had happened in General Douglas MacArthur's occupation headquarters. In that context, when the Japanese legislature made a proposal that was not to the Americans' liking, MacArthur simply vetoed it and insisted upon his staff's version. In Taiwan there was no American occupation, and the JCRR was a joint Sino-American operation in which Chinese members had a numerical advantage. American policymakers had an overriding influence by virtue of providing the majority of the financing, but how exactly the JCRR influenced the wording of Taiwan's land reform policy is unclear. The American commissioners kept a low profile during and after their work in Taiwan, opting instead to play up the role of the Nationalist government, and unlike their counterparts in occupied Japan they did not leave substantial documentary evidence of policy formation. The five JCRR commissioners arrived at consensus in verbal meetings whose detailed minutes could not be located even by the commission's institutional biographer. The JCRR then depended on the Taiwanese legislature to pass its proposals into law, and in the case of land reform the legislature

¹⁸⁸ Yager, 113-15.

only did so after prodding from Prime Minister Chen and President Chiang, who were advised by Ladejinsky and the JCRR. Despite the apparent impossibility of penetrating this circle to learn precisely how the wording of the relevant laws came about, it is obvious that the Taiwanese land reform is a very close copy of the American-authored Japanese reform. The retention number, the schedule of payments, and the structure of the local committees varied only slightly, and these elements would reappear yet again in the still more overtly-American program for South Vietnam in 1957.¹⁸⁹

Under the Land to the Tiller Law the total amount of land that existing landowners could not legally retain amounted to 143,568 chia, approximately one-sixth of Taiwan's total cultivable acreage. The Provincial Land Administration compulsorily purchased this land at the rate of two and a half years' worth of the main crop's value, the same price it had put on public land during phrase two but less than the fair-market value of the land. In lieu of cash, whose value was uncertain due to inflation (prices rose by 3400% in 1949 and over 300% in 1950), the government paid landlords in a combination of crops, bonds, and stocks in government-owned industries. This was done on Ladejinsky's advice, since he had seen Japanese landlords' cash compensations evaporate as the purchasing power of the yen dropped. In this respect, then, the JCRR's program was an improvement over the Japanese one. The Taiwanese bonds came in two varieties: paddy bonds redeemable in twenty semi-annual installments at the market value of rice, and dry field bonds redeemable at the same schedule for the value of sweet potatoes. They also bore four percent annual interest. The issuance of stocks, meanwhile, made

¹⁸⁹ Yager, 15-16. See chapter 6 of the present study for more on Vietnam.

former landlords shareholders in four Nationalist-owned industries: the Taiwan Cement Corporation, the Pulp and Paper Corporation, the Industrial and Mining Corporation, and the Agricultural and Forestry Development Corporation. Thus the wealth of over 106,000 landlords was “diverted into much needed industrial development.” Taiwan's landlords, both absentee and resident, had little to resent from the JCRR's three-stage land reform in which their interests were “better protected” than had been the case for their counterparts in Japan just a few years earlier.¹⁹⁰

Tenants who wished to buy land, on the other hand, faced built-in costs. Recipients of private land during step three paid more than buyers of government land had paid in step two. The base rate was still 2.5 times the annual value of the crop, but this time there was an additional four percent interest, mirroring the interest borne by the landlords' rice and sweet-potato bonds. None of a buyers' payments could exceed 37.5% of the land's yearly value, the amount that step one had set as the rent cap. This ceiling may have been intended to protect tenants from spending more than they could afford, but it also made an accrual of interest unavoidable.¹⁹¹

Despite its generosity to landlords and its relatively high cost for tenants, the law had some advantages for purchasers of land. Titles to farmland were transferred to buyers upon the first payment rather than the last, and the only restriction on use during

¹⁹⁰ Kang Chao, *Economic Effects of Land Reform in Taiwan, Japan and Mainland China: A Comparative Study* (University of Wisconsin, 1972), 5; Koo, 35; Yager, 38, 115.

¹⁹¹ Publishers of Taiwan Pictorial, “Taiwan: Land of Progress,” 25; American Embassy, Taipei, “Taiwan,” 13; JCRR, Information Office, “Land-to-the-Tiller,” 8-9.

the intervening ten-year period was that land could not be resold. Buyers could choose to pay in cash or in kind.¹⁹²

The reduction in tenancy and tenanted land was dramatic. The number of farm households that owned part or all of their land rose from 380,936 out of 665,134 households in the year 1949 (57.2%) to 605,230 out of 771,002 households in 1955 (78.5%). Full owners became the new majority. In the same period the portion of tenant-farmed land fell from about 50% to under 16% of all farmland. In 1939, 14% of Taiwan's land was tied up in holdings of 3 or more chia. By 1956, after land reform established 3 chia as the ceiling, that number fell by half to 7%. Taiwanese land reform did not bring about changes as sweeping as those in Japan, where tenancy and tenanted land virtually ceased to exist, but even its more conservative policies had brought about a significant reduction in tenancy rates and tangible improvements for people who remained tenants. The Land to the Tiller Law made ownership commonplace.¹⁹³

LIKEMINDED PARTNERS

This study has argued that a basically Jeffersonian conception of the relationship between landownership and liberal capitalist democracy was a motivating factor for American land reformers. In the context of occupation, in Japan and South Korea, conservative local legislatures were reluctant to pass reforms that upset the pro-landlord status quo. But in the Republic of China, an independent nation allied to the United

¹⁹² Chao, 6.

¹⁹³ Publishers of Taiwan Pictorial, "Taiwan: Land of Progress," 25; American Embassy, Taipei, "Taiwan," 13; JCRR, Information Office, "Land-to-the-Tiller," 8-9.

States, where land reform was designed by a collaborative committee (albeit one supported by American money and that based its redistribution on the program Americans had designed for Japan), Americans found that the Chinese Nationalists were willing and likeminded partners. Jeffersonianism may have motivated Americans, but Chinese ideology would have had different roots. For that matter, the Ukraine-born Ladejinsky, chief among American land reformers abroad and an important contributor to JCRR policy, might not be expected to have absorbed as much Jeffersonian rhetoric as his American-born colleagues. Clearly it was possible for parties with different cultural reference points to come to the same conclusion about the need for sweeping redistribution.

The JCRR explained the need for a land reform program in both material and political terms. “A contented, progressive land-owning agricultural population usually produces more than a system of tenancy,” said a JCRR promotional pamphlet, because landowners were more likely to improve their land in expectation of future returns. At the same time, poor conditions and little hope for advancement in rural areas created “a potentially fertile field for Communist propaganda.” These were the same justifications that had been given for land reform in Japan and South Korea and would later be revived in South Vietnam. To address such issues, reformers could have been content with lowering rents, establishing longer, more secure terms of tenure, and providing yield-increasing technologies to farmers. The Taiwanese government could have sold or given shares in public industries to landlords, enticing them to shift their capital from agriculture to industry, without forcibly depriving them of their side income from the

land. Such measures could have brought about greater peasant contentment and higher agricultural production without going so far as to revoke landlords' established property rights. Yet Chinese and American reformers alike thought it necessary to circumscribe those rights in the interest of equalizing rural society.¹⁹⁴

Governor Chen Cheng saw the JCRR program as the latest in a series of Chinese land reforms stretching back two millennia. Many of those had been responses to actual or feared rural revolts, but Chen also saw them as the products of “physiocrats” who “regarded the development of farming and sericulture as the most important task” of government. Similarly, American reformers did not view redistribution as merely defensive; rather, it was a way to turn a poor agricultural nation into a wealthier one and eventually an industrial one, and a feudal society into a democratic one. Inequitable holdings in a private property system were antithetical to the romantic American belief in family-sized farms. It was surely an American who wrote for a JCRR pamphlet, “No longer 'peasants,' trudging through life in thankless labor for an unknown landlord,” Taiwan’s farmers “are developing an interest in civic affairs and local government. They are becoming aware that in a democracy, they too are important.” Yet the Chinese members of the commission and Chinese governmental authorities were full and active participants in the project, a far cry from the majority of skeptical Japanese, Korean, and later South Vietnamese officials. It is outside the scope of this study to find the explanation for the discrepancy, but simple Jeffersonianism clearly will not do, nor will simple anticommunism (since the Vietnamese and the Koreans, and to a lesser extent the

¹⁹⁴ JCRR, Information Office, “Land-to-the-Tiller,” 1-2.

Japanese, had as much cause to fear internal and external communist attack as the Nationalists on Taiwan.) A simple and pragmatic explanation is that the Nationalists were newly come to Taiwan *en masse*, and the redistribution of farmland offered a way to solidify their authority at the village level. Korean scholar Kim Seong Bo subscribes to that hypothesis as well.¹⁹⁵

In any case, neither American nor Chinese reformers viewed land redistribution as a panacea. They knew that it exacerbated rather than relieved one of the most fundamental problems of Asian agriculture, namely the small size of farms. Larger farms, being more suitable to mechanization and to the emergence of economies of scale, have fewer labor costs per unit of output. However, the Taiwanese land reform was “not intended to either increase or decrease the size of the farming unit.” Reformers expected land reform to increase agricultural efficiency in the long term, but they were willing to accept inefficiencies and even short-term production decreases in order to achieve a higher rate of landownership as quickly as possible. The 1953 rice yield, which came in after steps one and two of the JCRR program, was 33% higher than the 1949 yield, but the JCRR declined to take credit for the increase. The commission consistently lowered expectations by stating that there were “certain problems inherent” in the sell-off of public land and that farmers would need time to “adjust their thinking and actions” to the new situation. Far from expecting clear and immediate evidence of the program's

¹⁹⁵ Kim, “South Korea’s Land Reform,” 59; Chen, 3, 10-11; Publishers of Taiwan Pictorial, “Taiwan: Land of Progress,” 26.

success, reformers believed that its long-term goals justified a measure of disruption and uncertainty in the short term.¹⁹⁶

FARMER FEEDBACK

After the rent reduction and the government land sale, but before step three, an American project evaluator and several Chinese social scientists conducted a survey of 857 farmers in 16 townships throughout the island. They found, unsurprisingly, “overwhelming evidence that the farm people prefer ownership to tenancy.” Over three-fourths of respondents agreed that the 37.5% rent cap had improved their living conditions, productivity, and standing in the community. Farmers were even more supportive about the forthcoming Land to the Tiller Law. Of the survey's four possible answers to the question, “Do you think the average tenant farmer would be better off or worse off if he owned his own farm?” over 85% selected “better off,” 1% chose “worse off,” and the remainder split between “about the same” and “don't know.” Over two thirds of tenants interviewed were optimistic that they would someday own the land they worked, with most of the rest saying that they did not know rather than replying in the negative. Three-fourths felt that ten years would be long enough to pay off the land they might buy under the Land-to-the-Tiller Act.¹⁹⁷

Farmers did not only tell interviewers what they wanted to hear; many voiced perceptive criticisms of the land reform. A number expressed doubts about the fundamental goal of the program, saying that broader ownership and stricter rent controls

¹⁹⁶ JCRR, Information Office, “Land-to-the-Tiller,” 5, 10-12.

¹⁹⁷ Raper, 1-3.

could not by themselves ensure a higher standard of living for Taiwan's growing rural population. According to the American evaluator, "the hope was often expressed that increased industrial work" would lead to "more opportunities for off-farm employment" in the years to come. Many farmers and their children actually wanted help leaving the land, even as the JCRR reform was strengthening their ties to it.¹⁹⁸

In the late 1960s, sociologist Martin Yang hired a team of sophomores from National Taiwan University to conduct a kind of happiness survey of rural Taiwanese people. The purpose of this study was to determine whether farmers felt on an emotional level that the land reform had improved their lot, and to show if possible a correlation between a farmer's "higher morale" and his or her "practical, tangible, economic" gains. Yang's effort to gauge happiness was unavoidably subjective, and his attempt to prove a causative link between happiness and material improvement is unconvincing. Yet the reformers who designed the land reform program certainly did so in the hope of increasing rural morale, so Yang's questions were highly relevant if largely unanswerable. For what it is worth, 90% of respondents to Yang's survey remembered that they "had really felt happy" when step one of land reform, the rent reduction, went into effect. Over 80% expressed agreement that landownership and the purchase of additional land, the focus of steps 2 and 3, were pleasurable and desirable. These feelings existed alongside, rather than contradicted, farmers' desire for non-agricultural jobs. If

¹⁹⁸ Chen, 74.

they had to work the land, they seem to have preferred to do so under the land reform paradigm.¹⁹⁹

LESSONS FROM TAIWAN'S LAND REFORM

Whether and how land reform contributed to Taiwan's economic growth in the 1950s and 1960s are questions scholars debated for decades without arriving at an unassailable conclusion. In retrospect this is not so surprising, since qualitative and even quantitative historical claims are rarely if ever unassailable. However, American policymakers gambled the stability of Asian governments and economies on land reform because they believed it was virtually a sure bet. They had a deep-seated and seldom-challenged belief that land redistribution would make inefficient peasants into efficient entrepreneurs. A number of scholars told them they were right, and the growth of Taiwan's economy in the years after the land reform seemed to prove it. Only when economists and historians took a closer look did the picture grow more complex and the problem of proof more intractable. In their work land reform's star grew slightly dimmer among a constellation of economic and historical factors to consider. At the same time, big questions about prevailing political and economic paradigms began to move from the background to the fore, with implications that have not yet been fully recognized.

Historian Al McCoy, who in an important 1970 article criticized U.S.-backed land reforms in Asia, identified the comparatively conservative Taiwanese reform as a success. This alone is surprising, since McCoy also argued that the Japanese land reform

¹⁹⁹ Yang, 133-140, 163.

was too conservative to be effective. More surprising still are the reasons McCoy suggested for land reform's success in Taiwan. He agreed with the people he called “propagandists for the American land reform program” that Taiwan's experience “is a vindication of the family farm as an efficient base for economic development.” Yet he felt that the credit for the success of the JCRR's program must go not to the policy itself but to “the infrastructure left behind by Japanese Colonialism.” He credited a colonial-era policy that strengthened local landlords at the expense of absentee ones for fostering development, since Japanese administrators in Taiwan had used this “land reform” to spread new agricultural technologies and collect more rural land taxes. The Japanese colonial government, McCoy said, raised the island's productivity and spent the additional revenue on industry and expanded classroom education for Taiwanese children. By contrast, McCoy wrote, the U.S.-backed reform “effectively eliminated agriculture as a major source of revenue for further development.” Taken in conjunction with McCoy's claim that the “failed” land reform in occupied Japan was self-serving and overly-generous to landlords, his view of the reform in Taiwan as insufficiently exploitative was inconsistent.²⁰⁰

McCoy's qualitative and quantitative observations, however, correspond remarkably well with the program's aims. “The government had eliminated landlords and could not impose heavy taxes on the owner farmers because it had conducted the reform in order to win their political loyalty,” he said, so “the agricultural surplus now remained in the countryside.” No greater tribute to the efforts of agricultural reformers on the

²⁰⁰ McCoy, 25-26.

island seems possible. McCoy observed that between 1951 and 1962, only 5-8% of the Nationalist government's revenue came from the land tax (a levy equal to 229 kilograms of rice per hectare), and that much of the necessary funds for industrial development came not from farmers but from direct U.S. financial aid and investment from multinational firms. The latter source of revenue took Taiwan in a new direction after 1955, when the Nationalist government legalized full foreign ownership of Taiwanese companies and allowed all net profit from such companies to leave the country. By the middle of the next decade, U.S. governmental aid had been effectively “replaced with Japanese and American corporate investment.” Whatever the effects of this extractive foreign “investment” on the country's urban workforce, Taiwan's farmers enjoyed an “84% increase in rural family income from 1962 to 1968,” a climb that continued until soaring living costs overtook it and the pressure to mechanize agriculture led to the aggregation of small plots into larger ones in the early 1970s. McCoy's attempt to trace the roots of land reform to the Japanese colonial period is enlightening insofar as it identifies how the Japanese government's approach differed from the JCRR's, but the data about taxation and farm family incomes suggest that JCRR planners succeeded in their attempt to raise rural standards of living by bringing more land and revenue under the control of working farmers.²⁰¹

However, certain Japanese policies likely did contribute to the success of the JCRR program. In 1970, a United States Agency for International Development summary of Taiwan's land reform gave a great deal of credit to the infrastructure left by

²⁰¹ McCoy, 26-27; Yager, 119.

the Japanese, especially a series of cadastral surveys carried out between 1898 and 1925 that had delineated and carefully graded virtually every plot of land on the island (the JCRR's surveys upgraded the Japanese ones, as some land had changed quality or use in the meanwhile, but the existence of prior data eased the process). The Japanese colonial government's irrigation, flood control, and rice seed experimentation efforts during its half-century of rule received praises as well. At the same time, farmers' cooperatives proliferated, and these extended credit, marketing assistance, and other services to farmers.²⁰²

Land reform in Taiwan, like land reform in Japan, offered no conclusive evidence that land redistribution made farmers more efficient. An economist writing in the 1970s, Kang Chao, found that agricultural productivity in Taiwan “declined by various degrees” in the first three years following the redistribution but rose above pre-reform levels after year four. Chao defined productivity as the value of the nation's output over the value of its input. Input is difficult to evaluate and Chao did not look exclusively at land that had undergone significant parcelation, but the data he used led him to two possible explanations for the short-term drop in efficiency: either the assumption that ownership would increase production incentives was wrong, or the decreased scale of production as large farms became small farms had a greater negative impact than the positive impact of ownership. Chao's opinion was that the tenancy system in Taiwan had “not severely impair[ed] farmers' incentives to produce,” so its sharp curtailment did not bring about automatic increases in productivity. Nevertheless, Chao thought the land reform in

²⁰² Koo, 4-5, 11, 22; Yager, 104.

Taiwan could be credited with expanding “the home market for industrial goods” by raising rural people's expendable income. Taiwan's farm households exponentially increased their purchases of modern accessories like radios and electric fans in the years following the redistribution.²⁰³

Two revealing expressions appeared in the Taiwanese lexicon after the first step of the land reform. “375 houses” and “375 brides” referred to houses built and marriages made in the wake of the 37.5% rent cap. Yang says that these phrases “were in popular use in the ten or so years” after the policy went into effect. Like Chao, Yang sees a link between the land reform and the increase in rural quality of life. He touts advances in areas such as home construction, electrification, nutritional intake, and access to healthcare and transportation. Taiwanese farmers agreed, when asked by Yang's interviewers, that a causative relationship existed between the land reform and these gains. They also agreed that the land reform had opened the door for greater participation in civic organizations like school boards, temples, political groups, and farmers' associations. To this list other scholars have added that farm families sent their children to school in greater numbers and for longer periods of time thanks to the increase in income following the land reform.²⁰⁴

Economists have used evidence from Taiwan's land reform to contest prevailing theories about agricultural efficiency. From the time of Adam Smith and his *Wealth of Nations*, economists had thought that tenants would pocket any net profits rather than

²⁰³ Chao, 13-18, 35.

²⁰⁴ Yang, 342-44, 366-68, 411; Koo, 2.

reinvest them in land they did not own, as a landowner would. Writing in 1969, almost two centuries later, and citing the records of the JCRR among other sources, Steven Cheung argued that, all else being equal, tenants and independent landowners tended to devote an equal amount of resources to their plots of land. “Thus, Smith is in error,” Cheung said. American agriculturalist and longtime China resident John Lossing Buck had also observed this surprising fact during his tours of China in the 1920s. Although ownership itself did not guarantee increased efficiency, Cheung's case study of Taiwan's “step one” reform provided evidence that *within* the tenancy system a mandatory reduction in rent resulted in greater farming intensiveness and greater returns per unit of land.²⁰⁵

However, Cheung understood that such purely economic thinking did not explain the timing or character of Taiwan's land reform. He recognized that political concerns, particularly the increased role of the United States, had been far more influential in this respect, and he noted that similar land-to-the-tiller efforts “had been introduced several times (for short durations) in China before 1800, and in several European countries during the nineteenth century.” The ideological and political rationale for such policies lay outside Cheung's study, but he acknowledged that they had had more influence on policymakers than theories about marginal returns and resource allocation.²⁰⁶

Ironically, Adam Smith may have been more in sympathy with the politically- and ideologically-motivated advocates of the top-down rural reorganization than with

²⁰⁵ Cheung, 3-5, 32-33, 59.

²⁰⁶ Cheung., 8-9.

scholarly economists inspired by his theories. Cheung's analysis of Taiwanese land reform throws Adam Smith's economic critique of tenancy into doubt, but Smith's suggestions for improving the system are consistent with the JCRR's approach. In *Wealth of Nations* Smith praised England's historical shift from serfdom and sharecropping to a fixed-rent, long-term tenancy system that “secures the longest leases” possible for cultivators. Smith's views likely derived in part from his untested belief that England's agricultural system was more advanced and less feudal than those which prevailed on the continent of Europe. Similarly, American land reformers believed that Asian agricultural systems were backward and that the independent family farm system that supposedly prevailed in America was ideal. “Modernizing” outmoded and exploitative modes of agricultural production required making the invisible hand visible — Smith advocated punitive taxes on landlords who did not adopt lifetime, rent-capped leases, and American reformers used government mandates to similar effect. While there is no evidence that the JCRR looked to Smith for justification, Smith's work could have provided an authoritative voice for tenancy reform.²⁰⁷

As the American government continued to design and sponsor land reform programs in Asia, most notably in South Vietnam, Taiwan joined Japan as a prime example of the policy's transformative potential. Delegates from around the world visited Taiwan “to make on-the-spot inspections” or to request “the dispatch of [Nationalist] Chinese personnel to help them solve their land problems.” Yet observers and specialists found it increasingly difficult to tease apart the benefits of land reform from the benefits

²⁰⁷ Cheung., 32-34.

of land reclamation, mechanization, irrigation, improved seeds and fertilizers (part of the global “green revolution”), and the growth of industry that Taiwan experienced in the late 1950s and 1960s. By 1960 Taiwan's agricultural labor force, which had grown substantially throughout the century, finally began to show signs of falling. Agriculture's share of the total labor force was down dramatically from the early century, though it remained above 50%, and the amount of cropland per agricultural worker rose to over nine-tenths of a chia for the first time. The shift of excess labor from field to factory, and the reclamation of additional farmland, deserve the bulk of the credit for those statistics.²⁰⁸

Still, land reform must receive a great deal of credit for changing the distribution of rural wealth in Taiwan. During the last two decades of Japanese rule, the cultivators of land — owners, tenants and cultivating landlords — owned around 66% of all income generated through farming. Landlords and creditors pocketed more than 25%, and the government claimed less than 10%. After the land reform, the JCRR reported that “the percentage of farm income distributed to landlords and money lenders was 9.76 percent in 1950-1955 and only 6.26 percent in 1956-1960.” By 1960, cultivators' share of income surpassed 81%. The remaining 12% of farm income in 1960 went to the government. In Japan, where the land reform had much more sharply curtailed tenancy and landlordism, rent payments constituted less than 3% of the average yield by 1965. Though the JCRR could have chosen to bar non-cultivating landlords from the agricultural sector entirely, as GHQ did in Japan, statistics show that even the

²⁰⁸ Chen, ix; Koo, 10, 13.

commission's relatively conservative approach to land reform brought about a radical decrease in landlords' ability or desire to extract rural wealth.²⁰⁹

They also show that, as intended, most of the income formerly absorbed by landlords now went to the tillers of the soil. This was the central objective of American agricultural policy in Asia during much of the twentieth century.

²⁰⁹ Koo, 16-17; Ledesma, 5.

Chapter 5: The American Bureaucracy: “A Happy Blend” of Rivals

INTRODUCTION

In the early 1950s, with the Japanese and Korean programs under their belts and the Taiwanese one underway, agrarian reformers in the Truman administration looked to Southeast Asia with confidence. In the summer of 1951 Dennis FitzGerald, a food aid official with the Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA), expressed his opinion that on ownership patterns, land use, rental rates, and credit infrastructure, “we already have enough knowledge. . . so as to be able to make some quite specific suggestions” for agricultural reform and development policies in the region. With apparently successful templates to work from, he expected programs for Indochina, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand to take shape by the end of the year. Their success would depend “on just how far and how fast we can prevail on the governments of these countries to go” through “adroit prodding by our Missions.”²¹⁰

That land reform was the official policy of the United States there was no question. President Truman had stated in October 1950, after meeting with committed land reformer General Douglas MacArthur on Wake Island, that

[T]he people of Asia. . . want their farmers to own their own land and to enjoy the fruits of their toil. That is one of our great national principles also. We believe in the family-size farm. That is the basis of our agriculture, and has strongly influenced our form of government.”

McCoy, who in 1970 argued that American land reform efforts in Asia had been

²¹⁰ D.A. FitzGerald to R. Allen Griffen, June 13, 1951, Dennis A. FitzGerald Papers (hereafter FitzGerald Papers) box 34, DDEL; D.A. FitzGerald to James Patton, September 11, 1951, FitzGerald Papers box 34, DDEL.

inconsistently and sometimes grudgingly pursued, nevertheless observed that along with “democracy, counter-insurgency, and apple pie, land reform has proven its totally bi-partisan appeal.” No bloc within the foreign policy establishment — whether Democrats, Republicans, Congress, the White House, university faculties, special interest groups, or bureaucrats — opposed the policy of land redistribution as a unit. Individuals were occasionally skeptical, and even these were usually advocates of slower or more modest redistribution rather than no redistribution at all, but as a whole each decision-making body supported and worked toward implementing land reform as a matter of policy.²¹¹

Friction within the government, whether between Congress and the administration or between different Cabinet departments, presented complications. Writing in 1951 FitzGerald worried that Congress might not share the administration's enthusiasm for costly development projects. The forthcoming Congressional budget for international economic and technical assistance was, FitzGerald thought, likely to be 30-40% lower than the White House had requested. Fewer personnel and financial resources could hamper efforts “to exert appropriate influence on the land reform activities of other countries,” FitzGerald wrote. Within the executive branch, the divisions that arose in the early 1950s were not about whether to pursue land reform, or even how, but on how public the efforts should be. FitzGerald was dubious of the idea of dispatching personal land reform emissaries from President Truman to the leaders of Southeast Asian countries, since “too much pressure from the United States might increase the resistance of local [i.e. Southeast Asian] governments and afford a basis for Communist charges of

²¹¹ McCoy, 40.

'Yankee imperialism.'" He added, rather obliquely, that direct action by Truman on land reform could be "particularly difficult at this time with a U.S. Presidential election just around the corner." Despite its success abroad, land redistribution was always a potential source of controversy because of its association with communist land schemes, and FitzGerald seems to have been wary of linking the issue too closely to the Truman administration itself. Not every policymaker agreed that American land reform efforts should remain out of the public eye, but the practice of using foreign governments to carry out land reform was nothing new. Even in the context of occupation, the American-mandated, American-designed Japanese program had gone through the Japanese legislative process, and Japanese prefectural governments and local committees had implemented it. This had been partly pragmatic, a matter of manpower and know-how (Japanese farmers understood their land, American soldiers didn't), but American policymakers' concern with appearances became even more marked in the early 1950s as Cold War tension influenced both domestic and international politics. It was important for the sake of appearances that the United States seem to help its allies help themselves rather than dictate changes to another state's most basic economic and social structures. Appearing high-handed would lend credence to the talk of American imperialism coming from Soviet and anticolonial sources, while the administration's political rivals would criticize the use of taxpayer money to finance overseas development schemes. Also, on the matter of land redistribution specifically, too prominent a role for the American government could prompt questions from domestic critics about the implications of the

policy in the context of an ideological struggle between socialism and capitalism.²¹²

In the field, carrying out land reform meant marshalling and monitoring statistics and expenses. In Washington, it meant controlling the message. The challenge of public relations, knowing who should say what — and when and where they should say it — divided the U.S. government on the issue of land reform even though virtually all parties agreed with the policy on principle. Bitter disputes over a Wisconsin land tenure conference and an interagency committee reveal more about how top-level American bureaucrats thought about land redistribution and its place in both the domestic and international political landscapes.

“A POLITICAL PROBLEM”: THE STATE DEPARTMENT VS. THE WHITE HOUSE

The State Department, like FitzGerald, preferred to operate in relative secrecy, whereas entities like the White House, the Agriculture Department, and the National Farmers Union tended to seek publicity for their efforts. Secretary of Agriculture Charles Brannan had once given five speeches in a span of three months “advocating American sponsorship of land reform abroad.” The different approaches of State and the other entities engaged in land reform activity lay behind a number of intragovernmental disputes. In July of 1951, John Baker, a future Assistant Secretary of Agriculture then with the Farmers Union, called the White House to describe an ongoing standoff over an interagency land reform “fact sheet.” Reportedly, the version of the document favored by

²¹² D.A. FitzGerald to R. Allen Griffen, June 13, 1951, FitzGerald Papers box 34, DDEL; D.A. FitzGerald to James Patton, September 11, 1951, FitzGerald Papers box 34, DDEL; D.A. Fitzgerald to E.N. Holmgreen, May 12, 1952, FitzGerald Papers box 34, DDEL; McCoy, 22-23.

State was viewed by the other committee members as “quite milk-toasty” [sic]. Agriculture had in turn countered with a version that met with the approval of all committee members except State. Baker told the White House that “State was raising objections to the forthrightness of the Agriculture proposal. . . and seemed to be afraid of having Secretary [of State Dean] Acheson labeled as an 'agrarian reformer.'” An unsigned note attached to the record of Baker's phone call, likely penned by a member of the White House staff who had followed up on the matter, attributed the disagreement to State and Agriculture's fundamentally different conceptions of land reform. “What troubles State is that Ag. thinks of it only as economic matter [sic]; but it is a *political* problem,” the note said. Although the White House understood State's perspective, it was firmly on the side of Agriculture and the National Farmers Union, as evidenced by a rather dramatic incident that took place just weeks later.²¹³

This next rift between State and the rest of the executive branch emerged over the issue of a conference of land administrators and academics in Madison, Wisconsin. The University of Wisconsin's “World Land Tenure Problems” conference was a five-week event scheduled to run from early October to mid-November 1951. Around seventy-five representatives from thirty-eight nations planned to attend. From the United States there were delegates from nine U.S. agencies and eighteen universities. Most of these were senior administrators and established scholars, but twenty-five were students or young civil servants who would remain in the United States for a full year at Wisconsin's Land

²¹³ White House Memorandum on land reform, July 27, 1951, George M. Elsey Papers (hereafter Elsey Papers) box 60, HSTL; McCoy, 23.

Tenure Center. The conference attendees would take field trips to farms in six midwest states, the Tennessee Valley Authority development area, the cotton belt, and Washington, D.C., where they would hear from a number of high-ranking officials and meet with Truman himself. Officials in Washington understood that the event was more than an academic conference; they saw it as an opportunity to showcase American agriculture, gin up support for the administration inside the farm belt, and publicize U.S. agricultural reform and development efforts overseas. The Technical Cooperation Administration and the Economic Cooperation Administration, both part of the State Department, partnered with the University of Wisconsin to provide most of the funding for the conference, and the Departments of Agriculture, Labor, and the Interior helped plan the itinerary. The White House, State, and Agriculture each planned to send representatives to address the delegates.²¹⁴

For the second time, disagreements arose over the question of using Acheson as a mouthpiece for land reform. On August 15 Truman's administrative assistant George Elsey received a memo about the Wisconsin conference from a State Department staffer named Robert Schaetzel. Attached was a note expressing Schaetzel's hope that Acheson would attend the conference, but informing Elsey that the "Public Affairs people" were reluctant to have Acheson speak on land reform because a "revolutionary" stance on the issue could undermine the administration's Mutual Security program and expose Acheson "to further attack on the grounds of 'leftist leanings.'" Acheson had been a lightning rod

²¹⁴ "Washington Schedule for Delegates and Trainees to International Conference on Land Reform and Related Problems," undated, Herbert J. Waters Papers (hereafter Waters Papers) box 14, HSTL; Introduction to *Land Tenure*, v-vii.

of Senator Joseph McCarthy's red-baiting campaign for several years, and McCarthy was from Wisconsin. To go into the senator's territory on a platform of land redistribution could provoke a new round of smears and allegations against the Secretary of State, hurting the cause of land reform more than it helped.²¹⁵

Truman's staff responded to the memo from State with remarkable passion. Presidential adviser David Lloyd's full response, handwritten to Elsey and circulated within the White House, is worth repeating because of its honesty of expression and the strong reactions it provoked:

George,
Schaetzel's memo to you shows how far the Public Affairs people are from understanding the public mind. A conference at a state university in a great Western agricultural state, about land use and land reform – with the entire landscape showing the benefits of farmer ownership and cooperative marketing etc – is about as far from a “leftist” set up as anything I can imagine. Revolutionary – stuff and nonsense! It's about as revolutionary as the Free Soil movement in the '50's – and right spang in the heart of all the Germans, Norwegians, etc that make up that part of the farm belt. Acheson should go there, & make a rattling good – down to earth speech – and he would have the farm organizations eating out of his hand. It should be teamed with Dr. Bennett – and talk crops. The President *should* make a statement.

By the time Lloyd's note got to Elsey, it had passed across the desks of several other White House staffers who added their own responses. “BRAVO LLOYD!!” wrote one, “I thoroughly agree with Lloyd” offered another, and “Lloyd's perfectly right of course,” said a third. Clearly both the White House and the State Department saw land reform as an issue with major domestic political significance, but they had wildly different notions about how the public would view it. State's impulse was to keep a low profile in

²¹⁵ Robert Schaetzel to George Elsey with attached handwritten note and routing slip, August 15, 1951, Elsey Papers box 60, HSTL.

anticipation of criticism from the right, while Truman's staff thought of the policy as populist and consistent with American values. On August 21 Elsey made his recommendation that Truman “be briefed orally on the subject, and that he speak to Acheson about it” in person. He further suggested that Truman make two public statements on land reform in the near future, one to the press and the other to be read as an opening greeting at the Madison conference. Planning went ahead quickly, and already by the 23rd Acheson's proposed speech was internally described as “a major address on land reform.”²¹⁶

The address prepared for Acheson was almost as “rattling good” as Lloyd could have hoped, and was delivered in Madison, but not by the Secretary himself. The outline drafted in State was not at all circumspect in its arguably “leftist” condemnation of high rents, tenure insecurity, and the difficulty tenants had in acquiring titles to the land they worked. Illustrations were to be given of relevant policies in American history, including “The Homestead Act of 1862,” “Land grant colleges,” “Railway rate control,” “Federal Land Banks,” “Farm Credit Administration,” and the “Farmers Home Administration.” Three examples of successful U.S.-backed land reform programs abroad — in Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea — were also part of the proposed speech, which was to conclude with a carefully-worded promise “to provide, as we have in the past, direct assistance to genuine land reform projects.” The speech indeed had the makings of a

²¹⁶ Robert Schaetzel to George Elsey; George Elsey to Charles Murphy, August 21, 1951, Elsey Papers box 60, HSTL; Memorandum of Conversation: Public Statement of U.S. Land Reform Policy, August 23, 1951, Elsey Papers box 60, HSTL. All emphases are in original. The reference in Lloyd's note to “Dr. Bennett” is to Dr. Henry G. Bennett of the Technical Cooperation Administration, responsible to the State Department. Bennett also delivered a speech at the Madison conference.

major public address, but in the end Acheson did not deliver it. Instead he released to the press a shortened version that included references to, but little elaboration on, each of the above-mentioned elements of the draft.²¹⁷

The full address, which adhered closely to the draft in all respects, was delivered by one of Acheson's assistant secretaries, Willard Thorp, at a banquet to mark the opening of the Wisconsin conference on October 9. It is unclear why Acheson did not go, as he had been scheduled to attend as recently as September. The Secretary conversed with Truman several times on the day the conference opened, but the only item they are recorded to have discussed that seems pressing enough to have kept Acheson in Washington was an ongoing Anglo-Iranian oil crisis. Whatever the reason for his non-appearance, it was evidently not to protect Acheson from the charge of “leftist leanings”; the administration instructed the International Press and Publications Division and the International Broadcasting Division, entities subordinate to the State Department that can fairly be described as propaganda outlets, to hype both Acheson's press release and Thorp's full speech “as further evidence [of] abiding US interest in aspirations of other peoples to achieve improved land tenure systems and broad-scale rural development.”²¹⁸

Publicity was the government's purpose in sending representatives to address the Madison conference, but State was ever a cautious participant. In Thorp's words, his speech (the one that had been intended for Acheson) aimed to lay out land reform's place

²¹⁷ Robert Schaeztzel to George Elsey, September 11, 1951, Elsey Papers box 60, HSTL; Draft: Suggested Points for Land Reform Speech, undated, Elsey Papers box 60, HSTL.

²¹⁸ Department of State: For the Press No. 898, October 5, 1951, Elsey Papers box 60, HSTL; Department of State: For the Press No. 914, October 9, 1951, Elsey Papers box 60, HSTL; Overnight Foreign Information Policy Guidance No. 817, October 9, 1951, Elsey Papers box 60, HSTL.

in the overall scheme of U.S. foreign policy “so that it can be picked up by interested domestic groups, and especially our own agricultural community, and also for exploitation by the Voice of America.” Yet Thorp reiterated State's view that land reform was essentially a political issue. Explaining why the end of the speech, which expressed the American government's ongoing commitment to “genuine” land reform, lacked specificity, Thorp explained that land reform was “a fundamental political problem for the countries concerned; a matter on which progress is gradual and continuing and at each stage must rest on broad public understanding.” Again, State showed itself reluctant to engage in rhetoric that could occasion public critique or embarrass foreign governments that had yet to carry out agricultural reforms. However strongly the speech opened in its enumeration of the ills of inequitable land ownership, the cautious ending with its suggestion of a slow, hands-off approach gave it “an element of anticlimax,” as Thorp himself admitted and thought wise.²¹⁹

A “THOROUGHLY PRACTICAL” REVOLUTION: DEFINING LAND REFORM AT MADISON

The occasion of the Madison conference, which it had helped to create, forced the Truman administration to overcome internal tension in order to present its case for land reform at length in a public setting. In a real sense, the world was listening: each paper at the conference was given in either English, French, or Spanish, and simultaneously translated into many more languages “through private communications systems” provided for the delegates’ use. The University of Wisconsin’s Land Tenure Center

²¹⁹ Willard Thorp to Charles Brannan, October 4, 1951, Waters Papers box 14, HSTL.

borrowed foreign language faculty from other departments of the university and hired translators who “worked through the night getting the texts ready for duplication.” Although foreign officials at the conference ostensibly represented themselves alone and not their governments, clearly people like Alam Assadollah of Iran, Chamberlain to His Imperial Majesty’s Court, and José Ramón Astorga, Under-Secretary of Agriculture for Chile, could be expected to pass along to their superiors what they could learn about U.S. policy.²²⁰

Thorp's address on behalf of the State Department was a fair reflection of many officials' attitude. It was strongly supportive of redistributive land reform as well as reflexively dismissive of communist efforts. It outlined in broad and emotional terms “an archaic economic and social system” in which absentee landlords profited from the labor of “tired and discouraged,” indebted, technologically primitive tenants. It spoke of land ownership's positive effects on “the character of individuals” and, by extension, “the nature of the prevailing political institutions” of a nation. It credited American farm owners with “most of our so-called progressive political movements” and with “strengthening the notions of freedom and democracy.” The address took pains to distinguish American-style land reform from its Soviet counterpart, defined as “the ruthless confiscation of the land by the State.” (American-backed governments paid for what they confiscated.) Concrete examples were beside the point and used sparingly. The simple message Thorp had for his audience — not the conference delegates in front of him but rather the American public and overseas consumers of U.S. news media —

²²⁰ Introduction to *Land Tenure*, v-ix.

was that American land reform meant “ownership of land by the man who works it” as well as reduced interest rates, cooperative marketing, tax reform, and various social fixes like literacy programs, while communist land reform meant collectivization, onerous bureaucracy, and probably violence. Thorp's address was not a policy statement and contained virtually no concrete information or analysis, but it was an advertisement that the Truman administration's dedicated reformers as well as its committed Cold Warriors could appreciate. In spite of a certain amount of disagreement between those who saw land reform primarily as a path to modernity and those who saw it first and foremost as a counterinsurgency tactic, almost all American policymakers in the early 1950s fell into in both camps.²²¹

Thorp's summary of past U.S. agricultural policies suggests how reformers in an age of ideological polarity, like the men who objected to the words “leftist” and “revolutionary,” could see land reform as a distinctly American path to agricultural development and political stability. U.S. agricultural policies, the speech argued, had been pragmatic responses to the tangible needs of supposedly average farmers. Thorp admitted that while America possessed from the beginning an unusually large amount of undeveloped agricultural land, it had done the right thing with its patrimony by selling it in “parcels of moderate size.” What the speech considered a moderate, average, ideal size for a farm it also defined as “family-sized”; American reformers of a more conservative bent could see themselves as promoting the well-being of families rather than giving handouts to an economic class. On the matter of price, the speech recounted,

²²¹ Department of State: For the Press No. 898, October 5, 1951, Elsey Papers box 60, HSTL.

in 1800 the government sold land at \$2.00 an acre, and later in the century at \$1.25 an acre, and finally 160 acres free of charge in exchange for the development of the land. In the view of anticommunist land reformers, the U.S. government had divested itself of land by a series of small market transactions, in direct opposition to the communist method of confiscating land and hoarding it in tightly-managed collectives. But the broad base of land ownership that resulted from this approach, Thorp stressed, was only part of the reason for the success of American agriculture. Equally important were the 1862 creation of land grant colleges for agricultural research, a 1916 law establishing Federal Land Banks that issued credit to farmers, and later legislation that promoted low-interest long-term loans and cooperative marketing. These things which “constitute our 'land reform' program,” Thorp concluded, were “revolutionary” but also “thoroughly practical and democratic” — a contradiction to some, perhaps, but not to American agrarian reformers in the context of the early Cold War.²²²

The Truman administration had one more timeslot at the Wisconsin conference, a session the morning after Thorp's speech at which three officials from three separate agencies delivered remarks. Undersecretary of Agriculture Clarence McCormick gave an introduction that mainly reiterated Thorp's talking points about the democratic virtues of family farming, the malappropriation of the term “land reform” by the Soviets, and the “liberal terms” on which the U.S. government had historically dealt with its farmers. Next Dr. Henry Bennett, head of the Technical Cooperation Administration, discussed outstanding tenancy rights issues in America. The idea, an internal memorandum reveals,

²²² Introduction to *Land Tenure*, v-ix.

was to “let foreign delegates know we still have tenure problems.” It was not seemly for the U.S. to appear high-handed, as this could validate allegations of imperialism. It would also be hypocritical, since about one quarter of farm workers in America were tenants in 1951. To preempt such critiques, Bennett's speech at Madison enumerated certain “errors” in U.S. land policy. The first, he explained, was the application of the Homestead Act to the Great Plains region, which received too little rainfall for farmers to make efficient use of the Act's 160 acre allotment. This, he said, had resulted in inefficiencies and ultimately the ecological catastrophe of the 1930s — the Dust Bowl that Bennett himself “lived through. . . though sometimes I doubted that I would.” The lesson Bennett drew from his experience was that agricultural policies, and in particular the size of farms, must reflect local environmental conditions and land use patterns. The second error in his list was that too much acreage in the late 19th century had fallen into the hands of corporations rather than individuals and families. Third and last, he acknowledged a spike in tenancy in the early 20th century as falling food prices led to widespread farmer defaults. From these three mistakes, Bennett argued, the U.S. government had learned the importance of agricultural credit institutions that offered “very long term loans at very low interest.” Bennett's frank, if selective, discussion of American failings in the field of agricultural development, grounded in his personal recollection of hardship, set his address apart among those delivered by the government delegation.²²³

²²³ “Wisconsin notes” memo attached to “Conference on World Land Tenure Problems” program, Waters Papers box 14, HSTL; Department of State: For the Press No. 912, October 9, 1951, Elsey Papers box 60, HSTL.

The administration's last official word at the conference came from FitzGerald, the ECA administrator who had earlier expressed confidence in the government's ability to conduct rapid land reforms in Southeast Asia, who now explained why U.S. officials thought land reform important and what they expected it to accomplish. He began with yet another iteration of the idea, voiced by all four government speakers, that “the wide diffusion of rights in property is, in our opinion, almost synonymous with individual freedom and liberty.” Moving to the topic of land reform's economic purpose, FitzGerald drew a distinction between countries with high agricultural populations and relatively few agricultural resources on the one hand, and countries with abundant acreage on the other. For countries in the first category, he argued, land reform must not only alleviate whatever discontent arose among non-landowning agricultural workers, but must also contribute to the growth of non-agricultural industries that could siphon off the surplus farm labor. In the second and “probably much simpler” category of countries, he said, land reform's larger object was to enable producers to make better use of the tracts at their disposal through government investment in technologies and rural-based social services. The United States, with its falling farm population and rising per capita farmer output, was the example FitzGerald gave of a well-endowed nation with a relatively strong rural infrastructure. He did not give an example of the inverse. Japan, which would have fit the bill perfectly, was seldom mentioned by the government delegates to Wisconsin, probably because it was still under occupation and therefore could have invited the dreaded “Yankee imperialism” allegation, but also perhaps because the rapid growth of Japan's non-agricultural sectors, exactly the kind of post-land reform development that

FitzGerald hoped to see, had not yet begun in earnest in 1951. FitzGerald's address also made the case that economic development required investments on the part of a nation's citizenry, and that impoverished, indebted tenants had little opportunity or incentive to invest. This final speech was the clearest articulation at the conference of the relationship between land reform and economic development as conceived by American officials in the early 1950s.²²⁴

The president himself spoke to the delegates as well, but not in Madison. On November 20, 1951 Truman left the “Little White House” in Key West, Florida, interrupting his tenth presidential vacation on the island for a one-day trip to Washington. In addition to several meetings and a dinner engagement, he joined an exceptionally large gathering in the Rose Garden that included McCormick, Bennett, two other foreign aid officials, three University of Wisconsin professors, sixty-eight conference attendees representing nearly forty countries, a newsman, a photographer, and three translators. To this crowd the president remarked that “farm credit and farm management are the two most important things of the foundation of a republic.” The next day the delegation from the conference resumed its scheduled events in the city, and Truman returned to Key West to resume his vacation. The administration had taken full advantage of the conference's opportunities for publicity, and land reform experts from around the world had gotten to meet the president and his top officials in the fields of agriculture and foreign aid. In the words of the conference steering committee, whose chair was a delegate from Syria and which also included delegates from the Philippines, India, France, and Paraguay, the five-

²²⁴ “Land Reform and Economic Development,” FitzGerald Papers box 41, DDEL.

week gathering had been “a happy blend of administrative and academic people” that had “prepared the soil for greater international cooperation on land tenure problems.”²²⁵

The delegates themselves, many of whom had academic backgrounds, probably found the papers they shared with each other more enlightening than the political keynote speeches. Ladejinsky spoke about Japan. It had been six months since Truman had relieved MacArthur of command for his public and private disagreements with Truman about the Korean War, but Ladejinsky credited the general with “unstinting” and “strong support” for the redistribution. He even credited a Japanese general from the wartime militarist government, General Araki, with supporting the notion of peasant ownership of land, though he noted that Araki’s words had had no tangible effect. It was Ladejinsky’s attempt to cast the American occupation government as “midwife. . . to a reform which was long overdue” and native in origin. He boldly took the point of view that the presence of a Soviet representative in Japan contributed to the success of the program by making the slightly less radical American policy more acceptable to landlords. But in other parts of the world, in Southeast Asia and the Middle East and Latin America, Ladejinsky said, “I do not know of any powerful leaders. . . deeply concerned with the land and the farmer.” He saw little hope of executives and legislators outside of Japan “rising above their personal interest” to carry out redistributive reforms.

²²⁵ Presidential Appointments Calendar, November 20, 1951, accessed November 23, 2013, <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/calendar/>; “Remarks to Delegates and Trainees From the World Land Tenure Conference,” November 20, 1951, Public Papers of Harry S. Truman, accessed November 23, 2013, <http://trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/viewpapers.php?pid=558>; “Preliminary Report of the Steering Committee,” undated, Waters Papers box 14, HSTL; Introduction to *Land Tenure*, vii.

The occupation had been a unique political situation.²²⁶

The two regions that occasioned the largest number of papers were Latin America and Southeast Asia. Yet within those regions neither Indochina, which would loom large as the host of various land reform efforts over the next two decades, nor Guatemala were on the agenda. Just three years after the Madison conference, the United States government would wade into Guatemala to stop the expropriation of United Fruit Company farmland by the democratically elected government of Jacopo Árbenz. It was one thing to support land redistribution when the deeds belonged to non-American owners and individual citizens of a nation. When land was held by a powerful corporate entity, American or otherwise, like the Sugar Corporation in Taiwan or United Fruit in Guatemala, redistribution was delayed or not carried out at all. The contradiction was seldom if ever acknowledged by American officials. Ladejinsky and the members of the JCRR had been somewhat successful in opening Taiwan Sugar Corporation land to redistribution, albeit on a special, slower schedule, but there was no Ladejinsky for Guatemala.

Land reform was cheaper, if not easier, said Madison conference planner Akram El-Ricaby (also the Secretary-General of the Syrian Ministry of Agriculture), in parts of the world where ownership rights “are of a dubious origin and legally and morally not well established.” The unstated inverse was that when land was held by a well-established American company, as in Guatemala, reform might not happen at all. And for all the talk about the native origins and execution of land reform in places like Japan and

²²⁶ Ladejinsky, “Land Reform in Japan,” 224-226.

Taiwan, when a reform program truly originated with a foreign government like Árbenz's it was not trusted and indeed forcibly stopped.²²⁷

Still, papers at the conference emphasized repeatedly that the “purchase and redistribution of land either by sale, lease, or otherwise, has been a major plank of agrarian reform throughout its history. After World War II this program has received a fresh impetus.” The conference concluded with a wish for continued government-university collaboration on land tenure problems, a partnership that “has much to commend itself and deserves widespread adaptation throughout the world.”²²⁸

For decades after its ambitious conference, the University of Wisconsin maintained a Land Tenure Center that sponsored much work on the subject. It also paved the way for future conference on land tenure, such as one held in New York in 1952 by the Ford Foundation. In one such work published in the early 1970s, Kang Chao, a professor of economics at Madison, wrote an elegant summary of two distinct and potentially contradictory reasons that American bureaucrats pursued land reform. “Land reform is sometimes conceived of as a vital precondition for takeoff in economic development,” Chao wrote, while “others contend that its significance is primarily political and that [it]... contributes little to production.” Records from the build-up to the 1953 Madison conference suggest that individuals in the White House, State Department, and Agriculture Department agreed that such a tension existed. The previously-cited White House note that explained the tension between State and Agriculture (“What

²²⁷ *Land Tenure*, 690.

²²⁸ *Land Tenure*, 693.

troubles State is that Ag. thinks of it only as economic matter [sic]; but it is a *political* problem”) is a very clear indication that some reformers prioritized land reform's political aims and others its economic ones.²²⁹

But this simple binary, while useful as a quick guide to the different goals of American land reformers, is incomplete and implies both too many and too few camps within the U.S. policymaking community. It does not capture the reality that a belief in the transformative power of landownership is at its core an ideological position, one to which virtually all parties subscribed, albeit for different reasons. Whether reformers' beliefs that land reform would contribute to economic liberalization and political democratization proved true was highly dependent upon circumstances. As Chao found in his study, it depended on “the background conditions of the economy in which land reform has been conducted and the way in which land reform has been implemented.” But land reform's strong appeal to American policymakers of different professions and agendas was not nearly so variable as the policy itself; it held steady from country to country, agency to agency, decade to decade. On the other hand, there were important splits within the “political problem” camp and the “economic matter” camp, and examples of overlap even by partisans of one side or the other. The White House staff, for example, sided with the supposedly economically motivated Department of Agriculture against the politics-oriented State Department in all matters related to the Madison conference, but they spoke of the dispute in thoroughly political terms: whether land reform was leftist, how local voters would react to a speech, and which officials

²²⁹ Chao, 1-2.

should appear in public. The Madison conference drama showed a great capacity for disagreement within the consensus on the importance of land reform. Both policymaking and interdepartmental tension continued without respite in the wake of the conference's "happy blend."²³⁰

THE INTERAGENCY COMMITTEE

If a more consistent, cooperative, frictionless policy for Asian land reform existed in Washington, would it have increased the chances of success? The case of the Philippines serves as a brief case study to test this counterfactual. As the Truman presidency neared its end, there were efforts to bridge bureaucratic divides and form a coherent land reform policy. The Interagency Committee on Land Reform Problems was a collection of representatives from the departments of Agriculture, State, Interior, and Labor as well as the Mutual Security Administration that oversaw foreign economic aid programs. There were two regional subcommittees, one for Latin America and one for East Asia. Early in the committee's history, its chairperson was typically a member of Agriculture who held the position on a part-time basis. Agriculture also contributed the largest number of committee members, and that department's proactive and publicity-seeking approach to land reform helped set the tone for the committee's discussions and recommendations.²³¹

One of the points on which the committee members "all agreed," according to one

²³⁰ Chao, 1-2.

²³¹ Interagency Committee on Land Reform Problems, "Summary Minutes," October 15, 1952, Waters Papers box 14, HSTL.

of them, was that even if “the making of statements on principles” was difficult and divisive, the need for “policy *action*” was great. Japan's land reform was already receding into history, the war in Korea had overshadowed progress there, and although the Formosa land reform was underway it sometimes seemed a sideshow to the “loss” of China. The American and British media wondered, in light of no apparent progress on land reform in places like Iran, whether “those responsible in Washington. . . are afraid to take an active interest” in alleviating tenant distress around the world. One paper went so far as to say “that by supporting the parties of 'law and order' they [the United States and its allies] have found themselves on the side of the landlords, leaving to the communists the undeserved glory and the very tangible political benefits of acting as champions of the peasants.” Historians have sometimes repeated this charge, which was later used to explain the failure of land reform in South Vietnam, despite all evidence to the contrary. The members of the Interagency Committee took the public criticism seriously, though they knew that their respective departments considered the topic quite important, and the minutes of their September 5, 1952 session report among other things “considerable discussion of the problem of getting this idea across both in this country and abroad.”²³²

When the U.S. government needed to speak with a single voice on the topic of land reform, the task of creating a unified statement often fell to the Interagency Committee. President Truman, of course, could and did make public remarks, as when he called the desire for land “one of the oldest and strongest drives in world history,” or

²³² J.H. Richter to The Chairman of the Interagency Committee on Land Reform Problems, September 29, 1952, Waters Papers box 14, HSTL; Interagency Committee on Land Reform Problems, “Minutes of Land Reform Meeting,” September 5, 1952, Waters Papers box 14, HSTL.

called land ownership and tenure security “an essential element of any democracy,” and made the sweeping promise that the U.S. government would “continue to encourage actively steps toward this end, both at home and abroad.” Yet when the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations asked the United States government for comments on Latin American land problems, a longer and more formal kind of statement was required. The Interagency Committee met at least twice in the spring of 1952 for the purpose of drafting a reply to the FAO. The result was a memo that stressed the importance of tenurial reform if “the man who actually tills the soil” was to feel the benefits of technical agricultural improvements.²³³

Not all members of the Interagency Committee were eager to see the U.N. get involved in land reform. John Richter, a representative from Agriculture, did not want to encourage the international body to conduct its own research and reporting on ownership patterns. The reason was that not all governments in the world could be trusted to reach the same conclusions as the United States on land issues; communists or communist sympathizers might exert too great an influence on the FAO. “Think of what they might come up with in connection with collectives or even tenancy!” he exclaimed to the Interagency Committee’s vice chairman. Richter thought that the FAO lacked “professional broad-mindedness,” and that some of its personnel had “a biased” or even “a definitely fellow traveling point of view.” A desire to control the narrative and to keep it within acceptable ideological parameters motivated the Interagency Committee despite

²³³ Charles Brannan to Joseph Short and attached quotation, July 13, 1951, Waters Papers box 14, HSTL; “Suggested Reply to FAO with Reference to Conference on Land Problems in Latin America” and attached document, May 9, 1952, Waters Papers box 14, HSTL.

the relatively progressive and collaborative qualities it had acquired from its Agriculture Department members.²³⁴

At around the same time, in the early part of 1952, the State Department was engaged in another effort to solidify the position of the U.S. government on land reform. Several months earlier, State staffers had written a “background statement” on land reform that it hoped could serve as a guideline for all government officials working on the problem. Characteristically of State, the mode of expression in the initial draft was cautious and highly politicized. The draft described land reform in the broadest and vaguest terms, giving the impression that it meant something like development. State's rationale for reforming the institutions of land were almost entirely political, with several paragraphs given over to discussion of “the Kremlin-inspired communist threat,” the benefits of “strong governments on an enemy's frontiers,” and the need to save farmers “for the free world.” Over the next several months this document made the rounds within the relevant agencies and went through several iterations.²³⁵

Equally characteristically, the Department of Agriculture responded to State's conservatism and geopoliticking with edits intended to highlight land reform's progressive and economic character. In October 1951 Agriculture staffer James Howard shared his department's chief criticism in a note to a counterpart in State:

We feel that the definition of land reform has been broadened beyond that carefully worked out by the Interagency Committee. In fact, it seems to be used. . . as if synonymous with economic development in agriculture. I don't

²³⁴ J.H. Richter to Fred Rossiter, April 18, 1952, Waters Papers box 14, HSTL.

²³⁵ Herbert Waters to H.G. Bolster, Marshall Harris, James Howard, and J.H. Richter and attached “Land Reform: It's Role in U.S. Foreign Policy” [sic], July 5, 1951, Waters Papers box 14, HSTL.

believe this was ever the intent of those working on the subject.

In addition to this critique, Howard forwarded several memoranda and rewrites that had originated in Agriculture and in the Interagency Committee. One of these was from Herbert Waters, an assistant to the Undersecretary of Agriculture. His rewritten portion included several references to the historical U.S. policy of promoting “widespread farm ownership.” Waters repeatedly linked secondary agricultural initiatives, such as scientific research and farmer education programs, back to this defining principle.²³⁶

The policy statement that ultimately emerged was a compromise over which State had the final word. It went to the government printing press in the spring of 1952, and although it included some of Agriculture's suggestions it omitted any reference to the work of the Interagency Committee. At the committee's next meeting members “discussed in some detail” the apparent slight, and Secretary of Agriculture Brannan wrote to Secretary of State Acheson on the committee's behalf. According to Brannan, the committee had been the first to conceive of a background statement and done a great deal of the preparatory work for it, but in the hands of State's writers “much of the material demonstrating the united policy and coordinated approach of all our Departments” was removed. While the document presented a correct recounting of events, the fact that such an accusation could be levied from one secretary to another shows that there was in fact no united policy or coordinated approach. Acheson replied with his regrets over the “inadvertence” and expressed his wish that State “cooperate

²³⁶ Herbert Waters to F.L. Erhardt and attached “Substitute for section on: U.S. Farm Programs,” October 30, 1951, Waters Papers box 14, HSTL; James Howard to F.L. Erhardt, October 19, 1951, Waters Papers box 14, HSTL.

fully with other interested agencies.” Inadvertence or no, the episode reveals that interdepartmental friction was an obstacle to the articulation of an official land reform policy.²³⁷

LAND REFORM BY COMMITTEE: A NEW LOOK AT THE PHILIPPINES

At its best, the Interagency Committee was not merely an attempt to combat excessive bureaucratic partitioning, but could select specific land reform issues to bring to the fore. This happened in the case of land tenure in the Philippines. In a document from early 1953, the committee categorized the problem of land tenure in the Philippines — which had gained its independence from the United States in 1946 after several years of occupation by the Japanese during World War II — as “critical,” meaning that peasant discontent was enabling “the spread of communism” and threatening “the existing social and political order.” Seven other countries fell into the critical category, but the committee considered the problem in the Philippines perhaps “the most critical in the Far East.” Communists were, the committee believed, already exploiting and worsening the violent Hukbalahap rebellion, while absentee landlords maintained a strong grip on much of the nation's land and charged “exorbitant” and “unreasonable” rents. To the committee, the history of the Philippines as an American colony made the success of “democratic institutions” there a matter of especial importance, as events there could

²³⁷ Charles Brannan to Dean Acheson, April 16, 1952, Waters Papers box 14, HSTL; Dean Acheson to Charles Brannan, May 13, 1952, Waters Papers box 14, HSTL.

color global opinion on the vitality and universality of American institutions.²³⁸

There had been at least three large-scale studies of land ownership in the Philippines before the Interagency Committee made the country a top priority in the spring of 1952. In 1950 President Truman had directed the Bell Mission, so named because it was headed by economist Daniel Bell, to report on the industrial and agricultural development needs of the newly independent nation. Operations were delayed because President Quirino of the Philippines wanted it to be a joint mission, whereas the United States preferred an all-American operation. In the case of Taiwan a joint commission had been preferable because it allowed the United States to use Chinese Nationalist personnel to carry out policy. The government of the Philippines, on the other hand, was according to Dean Acheson too marked by “malfeasance,” “limitations,” and “deficiencies” for a joint operation to achieve the necessary results. The government of the Philippines had passed a law to lower rents by up to 70%, but the Bell Mission found that the law had not been enforced. As the land tenure problem had worsened, “the dissident trouble” had spread. The Bell Mission recommended the usual approach: purchase land from large estates and sell it to tenants at low cost. Strikingly, despite the very real possibility that the government would fall to the Hukbalahap rebels, Bell recommended that American aid be issued only on the condition that Americans be allowed to supervise sweeping economic and social reforms, including a land reform.²³⁹

²³⁸ Inter-Agency Committee on Land Reform Problems to Agricultural Sub-Committee, January 14, 1953, Waters Papers box 21, HSTL.

²³⁹ “Economic Report Part Two: Development Problems and Policies,” 1949, John Melby Papers (hereafter Melby Papers) box 7, HSTL; Dean Acheson to President Truman, June 1, 1950, Official File (hereafter OF)

The Bell Mission echoed an earlier study and preceded several more attempts to get the Quirino and American governments to act. The Philippine-United States Agricultural Mission had singled out inequitable land distribution as a problem in 1946, and the Bell report observed that the situation had only deteriorated since then. A subsequent study, the Hardie Report on Philippines Land Tenure Reform, agreed with the Bell Mission's recommendations on the need for land reform. Robert Hardie, who headed this follow-up, had previously worked alongside Wolf Ladejinsky during the Japanese program. Around the same time, Colonal Edward Lansdale, CIA advisor to the Quirino government, "urged Defense Minister Ramon Magsaysay to adopt an immediate program of rural reform to erode peasant support for the Huks." Landsale and Magsaysay would each rise to even more influential positions in their respective governments despite their failure to achieve significant results on the problem at hand.²⁴⁰

In response to the Hardie Report, the Interagency Committee made land reform in the Philippines a top priority. Its members "strongly recommended" that the U.S. government "support by all possible means the recommendations" made by Hardie and Bell. The committee stressed that quick action was crucial and that "the rural people of the Philippines should know promptly" that "action to improve the land tenure situation in their country" was underway. The objective was to be, as usual, the "creation of owner-cultivators of family-sized farms" through the creation of local elected land reform boards and the compulsory buy-outs of landlords along the lines of the Japanese, Korean,

1055-F box 1737, Philippine War Damage Commission, HSTL; "Comments of the Far East Working Group of the Inter-Agency Committee," April 8, 1952, Waters Papers box 14, HSTL; McCoy, 27-28.

²⁴⁰ McCoy, 28.

and Taiwanese programs.²⁴¹

Contrary to the claims of unfriendly media at the time, and some historians since, that Washington bolstered local elites at the expense of ambitious reforms, all concerned parties in the Truman administration saw a sweeping land reform in unstable areas — rather than reinforcement of the feudal status quo — as a solution to the Huk rebellion.

As Hardie observed, in the absence of an immediate land reform program

. . . it is easy to see the situation worsening to a point where the United States would be forced to take direct, expensive and arbitrary steps to insure against the loss of the Philippines to the communist bloc in Asia—and would still be faced with finding a solution to the underlying problem.

Still, for political reasons many thought it would be best to pursue the desired reforms in relative secrecy. As an Interagency Committee member wrote, “The people of the Far East can be effectively dealt with in private but resent recommendations being publicized.” This was a particularly inartful expression of the longstanding desire among many in Washington to have land reform appear to stem from foreign governments, in order that they might receive the gratitude of the people and that the United States might not be accused of meddling in the internal affairs of other, often formerly imperialized, nations.²⁴²

As it happened, the resolution of the land reform question in the conflict-torn Philippines was somewhat anticlimactic, at least in the short term. A showdown seemed imminent when Quirino rejected the Hardie Report's “sweeping recommendations out of

²⁴¹ McCoy, 28; “Comments of the Far East Working Group of the Inter-Agency Committee,” April 8, 1952, Waters Papers box 14, HSTL.

²⁴² “Declassification of 'Agrarian Reform in the Philippines,'" January 30, 1952, Waters Papers box 14, HSTL; McCoy, 28.

hand and labelled it a national insult.” But in 1953 Magsaysay came to power and pursued populist measures in accordance with his American patrons' wishes. McCoy acknowledges that “a well publicized program of limited land distribution to 'rehabilitated' Huks played a decisive part” in an “effective counter-insurgency strategy” that largely brought the conflict to a close by 1953. Magsaysay made land reform a linchpin of his presidential campaign, especially in Hukbalahap stronghold areas.²⁴³

However, McCoy observes that President Magsaysay's promises came to fruition only slowly and unevenly. After 1953 and the return of relative stability to the Philippines, land reform stopped short of completion. McCoy blames a change of heart among American policymakers. A closer examination reveals no such shift on Washington's part. McCoy identifies land reform hand John Cooper, a veteran of the Japanese program who would later become one of the most fervent pro-redistribution voices in South Vietnam, as “strongly opposed” to “basic social change” in the Philippines. Yet Cooper's writings from Manila show no such opposition. Rather, Cooper cautioned that small-scale solutions to rural dissatisfaction, such as resettlement onto uncultivated land, “will meet the present social challenge” but “will not provide a permanent solution to all land tenure difficulties in the Philippines.” He reported that “serious social unrest conditions requiring frequent military action” continued in areas with over 60% tenancy rates, and recommended steps to reduce tenancy. American policymakers had been unanimous in recommending land reform, but Magsaysay's government followed the recommendations of Cooper, Bell, Hardie, Lansdale, and the

²⁴³ McCoy, 29-30.

Interagency Committee incompletely and unevenly. As McCoy recounts, “unlimited expropriation and redistribution” occurred only in the most rebellious localities where tenancy rates were extremely high, while in other parts of the country landlord resistance stymied land reform efforts. Many scholars, for example Philip Catton, feel that the power of landed interests was a factor in South Vietnam president Ngo Dinh Diem's decision not to follow his American adviser's recommendation for a strong land reform program, and Magsaysay may have made a similar calculation. There was never a move in Washington to “abandon” land reform, and the much-promoted policy would soon get underway in South Vietnam with the full (if always fractured) support of the American foreign policy establishment.²⁴⁴

Intragovernmental work on land reform was never free of friction, and in the case of the Philippines it does not even seem to have been an important factor in land reform's success or failure. The outcome of a reform push depended on conditions in the country undertaking the reform. In the case of South Vietnam, as we shall see, the relationship between an American-backed government and its *in-situ* land reform advisers, and the extent of the United States' influence on the speed and scope of land redistribution, were decisive. Moreover, the fractured and often antagonist relationship between different parts of the U.S. government actually *helped* rather than hindered the emergence of a land reform program in South Vietnam, as will be seen.

²⁴⁴ McCoy, 29-30; For more on Catton's view of Diem and land reform, see chapter 6.

Chapter 6: South Vietnam: “Before it is Too Late”

INTRODUCTION

Attempts by the United States government to enact land redistribution in South Vietnam began in the mid-1950s. At that time land reform was a linchpin of U.S. foreign policy in Asia. Wolf Ladejinsky, author of the legislation that had eliminated tenancy in occupied Japan, encountered political controversy in Washington and administrative challenges in Saigon in his attempt to bring about greater equality of land ownership in South Vietnam. This initial attempt to modify land tenure arrangements failed when redistribution stalled, far from complete, in 1961. Although new land reform legislation did not appear until 1970, the 1960s were by no means years of inaction on land reform. Years of behind-the-scenes efforts by American policymakers in Washington and Saigon culminated in the Land to the Tiller Law, an ambitious but doomed attempt to complete the work that Ladejinsky had begun over a decade earlier. Internal notes and memoranda, some first cited in this study, suggest that bureaucratic intrigue and political infighting within the Johnson administration and the U.S. Congress both hindered and facilitated the emergence of a new land reform program in war-ravaged South Vietnam.²⁴⁵

The Republic of Vietnam was born at a propitious time in the history of land reform. In the mid-1950s, agricultural redistribution had broad support within the U.S. foreign policy establishment. Policymakers and academics believed that landowners were more productive cultivators than tenants, and they feared the revolutionary potential

²⁴⁵ The bulk of this chapter, including citations to newly-declassified archival material, was originally published as an article. See David Conrad, “‘Before it is Too Late’: Land Reform in South Vietnam, 1956-1968,” *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2014), 34-57.

of landless peasants. The administrators of occupied Japan designed an ambitious program that virtually eliminated tenancy there by 1949, and soon afterward Chiang Kai-shek and his American allies used land reform to help solidify the Nationalists' rule of Taiwan. A University of Wisconsin land tenure conference in 1951 gave scholars from five continents a platform to discuss land ownership patterns around the world. The Truman administration sent representatives to the conference and expressed its view that “there is no more urgent problem” for the majority of the world's population than “antiquated systems of land ownership.” When the 1954 Geneva Conference brought South Vietnam into existence, land reform was a rite of passage for developing nations allied to the United States.²⁴⁶

Land reform in South Vietnam would prove difficult to achieve, but not for lack of interest on the American side. Efforts persisted, erratically, from the beginning of country's existence until the end. Ngo Dinh Diem, who held the presidency from 1955 until his assassination in 1963, weakened key portions of Washington's initial redistribution plan. Under that law, known as Ordinance 57, Diem's government seized formerly French-owned lands, redistributed some of the country's tenanted acreage, and capped the amount of farmland that individuals could own and rent out. Yet the program lapsed into disuse after only a few years. This first shot at land reform ended partly because Vietnamese and American policymakers turned their attention to other rural reorganization schemes such as agrovilles and strategic hamlets. After the failure of these

²⁴⁶ Press release, October 9, 1951, Elsey Papers, box 60, folder “Foreign Relations – Land reform proposals,” HSTL.

experiments and the escalation of the war, personnel changes in Washington and bipartisan congressional pressure generated a second push for land reform that culminated in the Land to the Tiller Law of 1969.

Scholars of American policy in South Vietnam have touched but lightly on the agricultural reform efforts of the 1950s and 1960s, perhaps because the communist redistribution programs appear more noteworthy in light of the war's outcome. Frances FitzGerald and her remarkable 1972 book *Fire in the Lake* is an exception, yet even she underestimates the extent to which American officials genuinely desired land redistribution in the 1950s and 1960s. Because of this, she provides few details about the personnel, congresspeople, and researchers who worked behind the scenes to bring about greater equalization of land ownership in South Vietnam. Another notable exception is Mark Moyar, who in his book *Triumph Forsaken* calls land reform and Ordinance 57 “among the most significant achievements of Diem's early Presidency” despite Diem's personal feelings on the matter. Moyar records that when Diem's American advisors expressed their desire for a strict upper limit on land ownership in keeping with the Japanese land reform, Diem argued that such a restriction would “eliminate my middle class.” Moyar also criticizes the U.S. government for providing only a fraction of the funds for the program's implementation. Gabriel Kolko in *Anatomy of a War* points out that government officials and their families had the pick of the best land subject to redistribution, whereas landlords who wished to circumvent the law could simply divy up their acreage amongst family members or bribe corrupt administrators. Kolko properly highlights the weaknesses of the 1956 law, but his discussion of official American

attitudes on land reform in the following decade contains errors. In particular, his view of presidential advisor Robert Komer's role in the story will be challenged below. Most recently, Edward Miller's 2013 book *Misalliance* tries to overturn the calcified thinking that Diem downplayed land reform out of mere conservatism or obeisance to landlord interests — a view exhibited, for example, by Philip Catton in his 2002 book *Diem's Final Failure*. Instead, Miller shows, Diem believed in a different, but no less extreme, mode of rural “transformation,” namely strategic resettlement.²⁴⁷

Although FitzGerald, Moyar, and Kolko devote just a few pages out of hundreds to American land reform policy in South Vietnam, theirs are more far sustained treatments than most. Charles Callison examines the results of the Land to the Tiller Law, which was far more radical than Ordinance 57 and aimed to eradicate tenancy entirely. Yet Callison does not explain how the law came into being or how it fits within the larger context of American land reform policies in South Vietnam. Eric Bergerud helpfully covers the Viet Cong's land redistribution policies but does not analyze Washington and Saigon's programs. James Trullinger shares fascinating first-hand observations of village culture during the war, but does not engage with policy debates. James Carter's excellent work on nation building in South Vietnam in the 1950s and 1960s highlights the role of American policymakers in promoting economic development, but discussions of land

²⁴⁷ Gabriel Kolko, *Vietnam: Anatomy of a War 1940-1975* (London: Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1986), 94, 244; Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972), 102-03, 154; Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 72-73; Miller, *Misalliance*, 158-160.

reform are curiously absent.²⁴⁸

Land reform in South Vietnam is an issue of much greater significance than its limited treatment indicates. In many ways, it is the final chapter in a longer, broader story of postwar agrarian reform in non-communist Asia. The fact that land reform remained a salient and controversial issue throughout the brief existence of the Republic of Vietnam is a reminder of land reform's central importance to U.S.-Asian relations during the mid-twentieth century.

THE LADEJINSKY AFFAIR

In late 1954, ten years after he had begun planning the Japanese land reform and fresh off an advisory role to the JCRR in Nationalist Taiwan, land-reformer-at-large Ladejinsky was once again in Tokyo working for the State Department as an agricultural attaché. In that year, two years after the end of the occupation, a bureaucratic shakeup transferred all agricultural policy personnel from the State Department to the Agriculture Department. Despite Ladejinsky's anticommunist credentials, his numerous governmental service awards, his professional association with anticommunist icons MacArthur and Chiang, and the fact that he had worked for the Agriculture Department before, his appointment was rejected. The Agriculture Department's security chief claimed that Ladejinsky, a Jew born and raised in the Ukraine, was not sufficiently familiar with

²⁴⁸ See Charles Stuart Callison, *Land to the Tiller in the Mekong Delta: Economic, Social, and Political Effects of Land Reform in Four Villages of South Vietnam* (University Press of America, 1983), Eric M. Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), James Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954-1968* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), and James Trullinger, *Village at War: An Account of Conflict in Vietnam* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

“American farming operations and problems” to work for the department. The department further alleged that Ladejinsky was a risk to security because he had relatives in the Soviet Union, had taken a trip in the 1930s to visit family there, and had once belonged to “two Communist-front organizations.” Ladejinsky denied the last of these allegations. Influential friends such as author James Michener and the U.S. Ambassador to Japan spoke publicly in Ladejinsky's defense. A widely-reported war of words ensued in which Ladejinsky's supporters accused the Agriculture Department of stupidity at least, and anti-Semitism at worst. Newspapers around the country picked up the story, and political cartoonists sided with Ladejinsky. Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson phoned Secretary of State John Foster Dulles to express his concern that the press coverage showed “a split between Agriculture and State,” but Agriculture refused to reverse its decision.²⁴⁹

In the end, Agriculture's loss was South Vietnam's gain. *Time* magazine, helmed by noted anticommunist and Asia-watcher Henry Luce, tracked the Ladejinsky story closely and reported that President Eisenhower was “embarrassed and angry” about Agriculture's decision. In early January 1955, the Foreign Operations Administration hired Ladejinsky “at his previous salary” and assigned him to an advisory position in Saigon. *Time* predicted that Ladejinsky would soon replicate his previous achievements. “Ladejinsky, who planned the U.S.-sponsored land reforms in Japan that gave 3,000,000 peasant families their own farms, will blueprint similar reforms to win South Viet Nam's

²⁴⁹ “The Administration: Odd Man Out,” *Time*, January 3, 1955; “The Administration: The Tricky Gooch Syndrome,” *Time*, January 10, 1955; Telephone Call from Sec. Benson, December 23, 1954, John Foster Dulles Papers, Telephone Calls Series, box 3, folder “Telephone Conv – General Nov. 1, 1954 – December 31, 1954 (1),” DDEL.

peasants away from Communism before next year's elections," the magazine exulted. The ever-worried Ladejinsky may not have been so certain. Speaking at the University of Wisconsin's land tenure conference in 1951, he had cautioned that conditions in occupied Japan were different from conditions in Latin America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. But, he acknowledged, because "Communists are masters at exploiting agrarian discontent," there was no choice but to press for land reform in areas of rural inequality "before it is too late."²⁵⁰

Diem had, at the urging of French and American advisers, taken some tentative steps to ease tenants' burdens before the arrival of the famous expert from Washington. Years of warfare in Vietnam had caused many French and Vietnamese landlords to flee the countryside. The pro-independence Viet Minh fighting force had redistributed much of the abandoned land. As a result, the Viet Minh, now governing North Vietnam and competing with Diem for the loyalty of the Vietnamese people, enjoyed great popularity in many rural areas in the South. In areas where landlords remained relatively well-entrenched and constituted a "truly conservative force," such as the fertile Mekong Delta, roughly 600,000 tenants, or two-thirds of farm families, cultivated around 80% of the arable land. The Viet Minh land reform efforts had made little progress there, and tenants still suffered from rents as high as 50% of the crop, high interest rates on borrowed money and equipment, and the threat of eviction at the whim of their landlords. To

²⁵⁰ "The Administration: Back to Work," *Time*, January 17, 1955; Hubert Humphrey to President Eisenhower, January 13, 1955, White House Central Files, Official File, 1953-1961, box 415, folder "Security and Loyalty Program of Government Employees, Ladejinsky, Wolf," DDEL; Ladejinsky, "Land Reform in Japan," in Parsons, 228-29. On Luce's support for American anti-communist interventions in Asia, see Robert Herzstein, *Henry R. Luce, Time, and the American Crusade in Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

address the situation Diem announced policies that capped agricultural rents at 25% of the cultivators' crop, limited the interest rates landlords could charge on loans, and made it more difficult for landlords to terminate tenants' leases. FitzGerald records that Diem's first land law "was so poorly designed and so badly implemented" that "very little land actually changed hands" as a result. Kolko observes that many tenants viewed Diem's policies with fear and skepticism, since the laws might have emboldened absentee landlords who had ceased collecting rents during the recent conflict to return to the countryside and reimpose the terms of their leases.²⁵¹

But Americans in the country were, as ever, determined to push for a strong reform. The U.S. embassy in Saigon pored over an October 1954 document from roving adviser W.H. Fippin, late of the Korean and Taiwanese land redistribution program, who outlined agricultural conditions in Vietnam and the reform efforts taken so far. Land reform, Fippin reminded the ambassador, should seek "the greatest good for the greatest number." Ladejinsky arrived in Saigon just a few months later. He found a government "struggling for its life" and an agricultural reform effort struggling to get off the ground. Diem's agricultural reforms, already very modest compared to what had taken place in Japan and elsewhere, had encountered immediate opposition. Powerful landlords opposed the new restrictions on their livelihood, while farmers who had received land from the Viet Minh feared that the new laws would encourage absentee landlords to return and reimpose rents. Even tenants who had not received land from the Viet Minh and thus

²⁵¹ Stanford Research Institute, *Land Reform in Vietnam Working Papers*, Vol I (Menlo Park: Stanford Research Institute, 1968), 24-25; Wolf Ladejinsky, "Agrarian Reform in the Republic of Vietnam," in *Problems of Freedom: South Vietnam Since Independence*, ed. Wesley R. Fishel (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961), 155-56; FitzGerald, 102-03, 154; Kolko, 93.

stood to benefit from the new policies exhibited, Ladejinsky wrote, a “disturbing” and “lukewarm attitude toward the program” because they believed, with good reason, that the Viet Minh and their southern offshoot the Viet Cong would offer better terms than Diem's government. Ladejinsky also bemoaned the lack of “administrative machinery” at the federal, provincial, and local levels — the existence of formal structures, committees, and engaged officials at every level had been essential to the successes of the Japanese and Taiwanese reforms that Ladejinsky had worked on. Because of these problems Diem's reforms had gotten off “to a very slow start.” Ladejinsky set to work designing a comprehensive rural reform program that ultimately took shape as Ordinance 57.²⁵²

ORDINANCE 57

Promulgated on October 22, 1956, Ordinance 57 was South Vietnam's most ambitious piece of land reform legislation until 1969's Land to the Tiller Law. By creating a mechanism for the transference of land ownership from landlords to cultivators, it far exceeded Diem's earlier policies of rent control and interest reduction. Under Ordinance 57, the government of Vietnam would purchase all landlord-owned lands in excess of 100 hectares (1 hectare is about 2.5 acres), not counting a maximum of 15 hectares “for the continuation of ancestor worship and the expenses it entails.” Landlords could continue to lease up to 70 of their 100 hectares. The government would determine the value of any excess land and pay the landlord 10% in cash and the remainder in twelve-year bonds

²⁵² Wolf Ladejinsky, “Field Trip Operations in Central Vietnam,” in Ladejinsky, *Agrarian Reform as Unfinished Business*, 223-224; W.H. Fippin, “Observations on Agrarian Reform in Vientam,” October 1954, J. Lawton Collins Papers box 25, DDEL; Kolko, 93; Ladejinsky, “Agrarian Reform in the Republic of Vietnam,” 160.

bearing 3% interest. The government would sell the land, at the purchase price, to the tenants currently working it. If the land had no tenants or the tenants did not wish to buy it, war veterans and landless refugees could purchase it instead. Buyers had six years to pay for the land in full, and they could not lease it to other cultivators within the first ten years of ownership. The responsibility for implementing the land reform fell to local committees, but the central government would have final say over land prices to ensure they remained low enough for cash-strapped tenants to afford. Washington would help fund the program, but Diem's government footed most of the bill.²⁵³

Ladejinsky never touted his authorship of Ordinance 57, preferring to cast it as a Diem achievement, but he had become Diem's advisor for the purpose of creating it and in its essentials the law was his. The collector of Ladejinsky's selected papers notes that Ordinance 57 exhibits the same "characteristic Ladejinsky hallmarks" found in the Japanese land reform, including the "painstaking determination of the acreage subject to redistribution, the determination of land purchase prices which would at once be fair to the owners and feasible for the tenant buyers, and the creation of provincial and local committees to supervise and administer the program." In another telltale sign of Ladejinsky's authorship, the ordinance encouraged landlords to trade the bonds they received in payment for shares in state-created enterprises. This tactic to enlist landlord support for industrialization was a Ladejinsky contribution to the land reform work in

²⁵³ Stanford Research Institute, *Land Reform in Vietnam Working Papers*, Vol II (Menlo Park: Stanford Research Institute, 1968), 92; Ladejinsky, "Agarian Reform in the Republic of Vietnam," 166.

Taiwan.²⁵⁴

However, Ladejinsky was not at all satisfied with Ordinance 57 and had not exerted final authority over its contents. His personal papers reveal several points of contention between he and Diem. First, Ladejinsky felt that the six-year schedule of payment was unrealistic. He argued that a “ten-year period was a more sober reflection of the tenant's financial position.” Second, the maximum limit of 100 hectares was many times larger than what Ladejinsky had advocated in Japan. The limit there had been closer to three hectares for owner-operators, even less than the amount the Viet Cong would later set in its redistribution programs. In early October 1956, Ladejinsky suggested to Diem a maximum withholding of 75 or 50 hectares, and he surely would have preferred an even smaller number to ensure that more land would be available for redistribution. Third, Ladejinsky was unhappy that the law allowed landlords to continue leasing 70% of their land — the Japanese reform had allowed just one hectare. This loophole meant that less than one third of the country's total tenanted acreage was available for redistribution, and that approximately “two-thirds of the tenants [would] remain tenants.” Ladejinsky reminded Diem that any successful reform “must apply to the great majority of the tenants” in order “to achieve economic and political stability in the countryside.” Fourth, Ordinance 57 left unresolved the status of roughly 245,000 hectares of former French-owned lands. Fifth and most frustrating to Ladejinsky was the slow pace of redistribution “compared with. . . Japan and Formosa.” Although in public

²⁵⁴ Louis J. Walinsky, “The Vietnam Years, 1955-1961,” in Ladejinsky, *Agrarian Reform as Unfinished Business*, 216; Ladejinsky, “Agrarian Reform in the Republic of Vietnam,” 166.

Ladejinsky put a positive spin on the law he had helped to create, he had clearly recognized Ordinance 57's shortcomings and had tried, unsuccessfully, to avert them. Diem had decided that Ladejinsky's proposals were too radical.²⁵⁵

The editor of Ladejinsky's selected papers believes that "some time in 1959 he became progressively more disillusioned with the evolution of events in Vietnam and with the prospects for his further useful service there." In 1961 he left the country and also ended his long and influential career in the U.S. government. He spent a few years researching Nepalese agriculture for the Ford Foundation before joining the World Bank as an agricultural development expert. He was studying agrarian issues relating to the Indian subcontinent when he died in July 1975, shortly after the fall of Saigon.²⁵⁶

Ordinance 57 remained the law of the land in Vietnam for well over a decade, but its weaknesses were substantial and it fell into disuse after the first five years. That it failed to achieve its ends was largely due to the changes Diem had made to Ladejinsky's draft and his government's failure to carry out in full faith even the weakened version. It was not that land reform was too liberal for Diem; it was too technocratic and too small-scale, in the president's mind, to "address all the problems that plagued South Vietnamese rural society. Diem preferred massive resettlement of villagers into new agrovilles, and the issuance of new deeds was not conducive to resettlement. Amidst halfhearted enforcement, only an estimated 10% of South Vietnamese tenant families gained titles to the land they tilled as a result of Ordinance 57. Yet the policy had not entirely failed to

²⁵⁵ Ladejinsky, "Making the Pending Land Redistribution Program More Practicable," in *Agrarian Reform as Unfinished Business*, 272; Ladejinsky, "Agrarian Reform in the Republic of Vietnam," 169, 170-72; Bredo, "Agrarian Reform in Vietnam," 748.

²⁵⁶ Louis J. Walinsky, "The Vietnam Years," in Ladejinsky, *Agrarian Reform as Unfinished Business*, 216.

produce results, as its later critics alleged and as historians' virtual silence on it may suggest. Under the terms of the Ordinance the government purchased 428,445 hectares out of possible 454,504 subject to redistribution, not counting former French-owned lands that the government had seized but that the law did not address. By 1961 local committees had sold nearly 60% of the land the government had purchased. Taking former French lands into account, however, the amount of government-owned land sold to tenants and other qualified buyers falls to 40%. Moyar is a rarity among historians in expressing an optimistic view of the Ordinance's accomplishments; Seth Jacobs speaks for many when he writes that "the results of Diem's land reforms were almost wholly negative." For Moyar, though, "Diem's land reform did succeed in breaking up the vast estates in the delta," and "the Communists would later lament that this redistribution of land 'seriously interfered' with their subsequent efforts to win over the peasantry through land reform." Simply put, the law worked as far as it went, but should have done more. Ordinance 57 had demonstrated the potential benefits of land redistribution in South Vietnam, but the process remained far from complete as the nation entered the tumultuous decade of the 1960s.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁷ William Bredo, "Agrarian Reform in Vietnam: Vietcong and Government of Vietnam Strategies in Conflict," *Asian Survey* 10, no. 8 (August 1970), 742; Roy L. Prosterman, "Land-to-the-Tiller in South Vietnam: The Tables Turn," *Asian Survey* 10, no. 8 (August 1970), 755; Seth Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America's War in Vietnam, 1950-1963* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 96; Moyar, 73; Miller, *Misalliance*, 161. Bredo and James Tyson were among those later analysts who dismissed Ordinance 57 on the presumption that it evinced no genuine reformist intent. George Kahin is representative of the many historians whose detailed accounts of the Diem period do not include treatments of this law.

AN INTERLUDE

“It is rather striking,” wrote William Bredo, Director of Development Economics and Agroindustries at the Stanford Research Institute, in 1970, “that throughout the entire period from 1960 to 1965 under the Kennedy and early Johnson Administrations, no support whatever, either financial or in terms of advisory assistance, was given to the Government of Vietnam to help carry through this most fundamental of social measures.” He referred, of course, to land reform. Bredo had gone to South Vietnam to direct a study commissioned by the Johnson administration and had emerged as a passionate advocate for land redistribution in the beleaguered country. He repudiated the inaction of the early 1960s as well as the inadequacy of the Diem-era reform. In his view, Vietnam required a “drastic change” from the “out-of-date 1956 Ordinance 57,” which he felt was inexcusably weak in comparison with the policies of “all [other] countries that had conducted land reform programs in Asia.”²⁵⁸

Strangely, Bredo and other analysts blamed the neglect of the early 1960s on political conservatism within the U.S. government. According to Bredo, “the forces who preferred the status quo” were “in the ascendancy.” The American government felt that “any real progress in completing the land redistribution already enacted” would alienate “the landlords and. . . the army officers who came largely from the landed class.” Roy Prosterman, a law professor who worked with Bredo, singled out “lower-echelon” officials in the U.S. embassy in Saigon who stymied reform. A private sector economist, James Tyson, asserted that American reform experts in the late 1950s and early 1960s

²⁵⁸ Bredo, “Agrarian Reform in Vietnam,” 744.

intentionally avoided antagonizing the landlord class “whom they considered the last bastions of stability in an already war-torn country.” Robert Sansom, a member of Henry Kissinger's staff in the early 1970s, was less specific but no more correct when he wrote that “[t]he basic reason land reform was not pursued [in the early 1960s] was that U.S. officials did not believe that land-based grievances were important.” Even Frances FitzGerald, writing in 1972, claimed that after the failure of the 1956 law “sheer apathy about the subject” of land reform meant that “American officials did not renew their efforts for another fourteen years.” In fact, the official hiatus was far shorter than FitzGerald realized, and her somewhat contradictory assertion that “the issue remained alive in official circles in Washington” is a more accurate summary of the period between the lapse of Ordinance 57 and the passage of the Land to the Tiller Law in 1969.²⁵⁹

The history of Ordinance 57 makes it difficult to believe that the United States subsequently neglected land reform because it had become more solicitous of landlord support. Political fragility, which Ladejinsky observed in abundance when he arrived in Saigon, did not give him pause about the need for quick and thoroughgoing reform. On the contrary, from the late 1940s on American policymakers had promoted land redistribution specifically in areas they believed were vulnerable to communist insurgencies. Ordinance 57's weaknesses did not reflect a change of policy in Washington, but instead resulted from Diem's decision not to follow his advisers'

²⁵⁹ Robert L. Sansom, *The Economics of Insurgency in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1970), 229; James L. Tyson, “Land Reform in Vietnam: A Progress Report,” *Asian Affairs* 1, no. 1 (September–October, 1973), 33; Bredo, “Agrarian Reform in Vietnam,” 743; FitzGerald, 151; Prosterman, “Land-to-the-Tiller,” 751, 756. As this paper will show, the embassy was indeed reluctant to pursue land reform, but not primarily because of landlord pressure.

recommendations. Pressure from large and absentee landowners may well have influenced Diem's political calculus, but it had no discernible impact on Ladejinsky.

Even during the first half of the 1960s, the theory that Washington prized stability in the South Vietnamese countryside over radical change does not hold up. To the contrary, many officials believed that sweeping agrarian reorganization was a prerequisite to the achievement of security, political stability, and economic development. This was the thinking behind the agrovillage project of 1959-60 and the subsequent Strategic Hamlet Program of the early 1960s. Unlike land reform, in which farmers ideally remain in place, the agrovillage initiative required relocations of whole hamlets and villages to areas the Diem government considered easier to defend and develop. Forced conscription into construction crews, for which laborers received little or no financial compensation, engendered deep resentment among the rural population. Instead of empowering cultivators and strengthening farmers' control over their land, as land reform aimed to do, agrovillages placed onerous burdens on the peasantry and increased the power of the central government at the expense of localities. While the land reform law of 1956 languished for lack of attention, the agrovillage program imposed “enormous” costs on the Diem government.²⁶⁰

The Strategic Hamlet Program continued the policy of forcible relocations while creating new opportunities for Saigon to extend its control into rural areas. The scheme provided for the appointment of local politicians close to Diem, the construction of fortified perimeters, and the deforestation of wilderness areas that the Viet Cong might

²⁶⁰ Moyer 82, 158-59.

use as cover. The American government had had little to do with the short-lived agrovilles, but for Strategic Hamlets there were “many enthusiastic advocates on the American side.” Historian Michael Latham views strategic hamlets as a modernization effort that aimed to create tightly-managed communities where peasants could avail themselves of governmental services, schools, hospitals, and clean wells. This experiment, which lasted only a little longer than the agrovilles and proved equally unsuccessful, shows that policymakers in the early 1960s were willing to engage in sweeping rural reorganization in order to achieve long-range political and economic goals.²⁶¹

Some American officials continued to fly the flag for land reform during the period after Ordinance 57 had fallen into disuse and before the push for a new, stronger law began in earnest. Scholar George Kasin ascribes pro-redistribution sentiments to Colonel Sam Wilson and Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann, writing that both felt “intensely frustrated over their helplessness in getting” local-level South Vietnamese military and political officials “to carry out the U.S.-supported agrarian reform program, which still existed largely on paper.” According to Kasin, who knew both Wilson and Vann, both men “complained that because these officials themselves had a vested interest in continuation of the existing exploitative pattern of agrarian relationships, it was impossible to secure their cooperation in implementing the regulations.” In other words, the problem was not so much U.S. passivity as it was anti-reform impulses on the part of

²⁶¹ See Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and “Nation Building” in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); FitzGerald, 123, 156-58.

the South Vietnamese government and military. This was the same dynamic that had earlier led to Diem's rejection of Ladejinsky's most radical proposals.²⁶²

ESCALATING LAND REFORM

Land reform had never disappeared entirely from policymakers' consciousness, so no single moment heralded its resurrection as a major priority for American policymakers. Contemporary participants pointed to a number of events as the most significant. Bredo lauded the arrival in 1965 of a small team of land reform specialists to the Vietnam bureau of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). These advisers were the first American personnel to deal exclusively with Vietnamese land reform since Wolf Ladejinsky had left the country in 1961. With their arrival, USAID's budget for land reform activities rose from literally nothing in the 1961-1965 period to \$14,000 in fiscal year 1966. This was a pittance compared to the over \$3.5 million USAID had spent on land reform in South Vietnam between 1955 and 1960, but it signaled a fresh start. MacDonald Salter, USAID's "best fellow" on land reform according to one official, thought the promulgation of Vietnam's new constitution in April 1967 was an even more important landmark. Two articles in the new constitution indicated the government's desire to resume the expropriation and redistribution of farmland, and to Salter these provisions "marked the beginning of a new period in the history of land reform" in the country. Prosterman agreed with Salter that initiative for a new program "came from the Vietnamese," but he selected a January 1968 speech by

²⁶² George McTurnan Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Knopf, 1986), 411-12.

President Thieu to illustrate his point. FitzGerald wrote of the “liberal journalists, social scientists, and congressmen” who “brought pressure upon the U.S. mission every year to implement a new land law,” and these people were indeed important catalysts, but she does not provide specifics nor credit the American officials in Saigon and Washington who ultimately backed the calls for a new program.²⁶³

None of these explanations tell the full story how land reform got a second chance in South Vietnam. Bredo, Salter, and Prosterman probably intentionally overstated the role of the Vietnamese government in reviving land reform. As participants in the move toward a new policy, they were aware that any new program had to look like a Vietnamese initiative to achieve the desired political purposes. Although some South Vietnamese politicians did wish to resume land redistribution and even discussed hiring Ladejinsky to design a new program, little could have taken place in the absence of American technical and financial assistance. On the other hand, the mere presence of pro-reform American advisers was not sufficient to ensure the creation of a bold, successful new program. John Cooper, who headed the USAID land reform team that came to Vietnam in late 1965, wasted no time in outlining the necessary components of an updated land reform policy. Cooper had previously worked on land reform in Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines, sometimes alongside Ladejinsky. His March 1966

²⁶³ MacDonald Salter, “The Broadening Base of Land Reform in South Vietnam,” *Asian Survey* 10, no. 8 (August 1970), 728; Wright to Rostow, September 10, 1968, National Security File (hereafter “NSF”), Vietnam Country File (hereafter “Vietnam”), box 58, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library (hereafter “LBJL”); Bredo, “Agrarian Reform in Vietnam,” 743; “Land Reform Provisions of New Constitution,” NSF, Vietnam, box 61, LBJL; Stanford Research Institute, *Land Reform in Vietnam Working Papers Volume II*, 92, 94; Prosterman, “Land-to-the-Tiller,” 758-59; FitzGerald, 151. In addition to the USAID-centered periodization Bredo and SRI provided, Bredo also claimed that the Thieu speech was a watershed moment.

report, the first substantial document on South Vietnamese land reform in years, argued that further expropriation could not wait. The government of Vietnam must, he believed, reduce landlords' maximum hectares as soon as possible. It was "necessary" and "urgent" for the United States to assist Vietnam in implementing a sweeping land reform strategy "at the earliest feasible time," preferably before the promulgation of a new Vietnamese constitution. But other American personnel in Saigon viewed Cooper as "a difficult and erratic man," and the U.S. embassy did not support his request.²⁶⁴

In retrospect, March 1967 and the winter of 1967-1968 stand out as two of the most important moments in the creation of a new redistribution program. In the first period, personnel changes in Washington and Saigon paved the way for a new study on the desirability of further land reform efforts. In the second period, a bipartisan Congressional subcommittee harshly criticized the Johnson administration's lack of a coherent land reform policy for South Vietnam. Together, these two events produced a determination within the U.S. government to pursue a new, large-scale land reform program that would rectify the shortcomings of Ordinance 57. By the time Johnson left office in January 1969, movement toward a new law was well underway.

Between 1963 and 1967, one of the chief obstacles to land reform was the administration's own man in Saigon, Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. The grandson of a famous statesman, Lodge spent his career in the public eye. He twice competed for a job that Lyndon Johnson ultimately won, first in 1960 as the Republican candidate for

²⁶⁴ Moorsteen and Holbrooke to Komer, December 7, 1966, NSF, Komer-Leonhart File, box 12, LBJL; John L. Cooper, "Land Reform in the Republic of Vietnam," NSF, Vietnam, box 61, LBJL; Hewes, April 26, 1966, NSF, Komer-Leonhart File, box 12, LBJL; Lansdale to Lodge and Porter, "Luncheon, February 23," NSF, Vietnam, box 61, LBJL; Al McCoy, 23-24.

Vice President and again in 1964 as a hopeful in the Republican presidential primaries. President Kennedy, who had also once beaten Lodge in a narrow Massachusetts Senate race, appointed Lodge ambassador to South Vietnam in 1963. When Johnson became president after Kennedy's death he kept Lodge on, and quickly reappointed him after the brief interim in which Lodge returned home to campaign for the White House. Before he returned to Vietnam, the 63-year-old Lodge said, "Something noble and brave is going on out there, and I am glad to have a part in it." Johnson was glad to have the "aura of bipartisanship" that Lodge brought to the team, and to have someone of Lodge's ability and gravitas in what the New York Times called "just about the most grueling post, when it comes to work and climate, in the American service." Undoubtedly he also hoped to assign Lodge some of the blame if things went badly in Vietnam.²⁶⁵

Lodge did not have strong opinions on agricultural reform in South Vietnam. His first stint as ambassador occurred during the years when land reform was not a high priority within the U.S. government. But during Lodge's second stint he found himself increasingly out of step with the growing interest on the subject. When Cooper of USAID called for a sweeping new policy of expropriation and redistribution, Lodge initially gave his approval. But by the fall of 1966 he was of the opinion that a large-scale land reform program was "out of reach" given the present administrative abilities of the Vietnamese government. Lodge now felt that a "low-key," wait-and-see approach was more appropriate. It was alright, he wrote, for Cooper and others to provide the

²⁶⁵ "The Administration: To Have a Part in It," *Time*, July 16, 1965.; "New Man in Saigon," *New York Times*, March 16, 1967.

Vietnamese government with “quiet advice and encouragement,” but Vietnam, not the United States, should determine the pace and extent of reform.²⁶⁶

One of Lodge's final communiques from Saigon “seriously” questioned the “desirability” of “dramatic action” on land reform. This telegram leaned heavily on a recent report by James Rosenthal, a foreign service officer on temporary duty with the Saigon embassy. Rosenthal had rejected Cooper's proposal for an “all-inclusive, formalized U.S. land reform program” even though such a program would have had “immediate drama and propaganda appeal.” Rosenthal believed that the American role should be to support and advise, but not to mandate, further land reform efforts. His views apparently influenced Lodge's reversal on the issue. Rosenthal was pleased that USAID had focused the government of Vietnam's “attention on further steps such as lowering of maximum retention rates, even if this has still not come about.” He believed that progressive Vietnamese politicians would slowly but surely overcome the opposition of landlords and implement the needed reforms. But those who wanted to foist “sudden or sweeping change” on the Vietnamese government in the form of a fully revised land reform package were, Rosenthal felt, naïve; the Vietnamese state simply lacked the “competence” and the administrative capacity to enact such a program.²⁶⁷

By the time Lodge adopted Rosenthal's views as official embassy policy, his days as ambassador were numbered. The man behind the looming administrative shakeup was Robert Komer, special assistant to the president. Lodge disliked Komer, and the feeling

²⁶⁶ Lodge to Komer, September 23, 1966, NSF, Komer-Leonhart File, box 12, LBJL; “Memorandum of Conversation, August 23, 1966,” August 25, 1966, NSF, Komer-Leonhart File, box 1, LBJL; Lodge, February 20, 1967, NSF, Vietnam, box 61, LBJL.

²⁶⁷ Lodge, February 20, 1967; Rosenthal to Komer, February 14, 1967, NSF, Vietnam, box 61, LBJL.

was mutual. The ambassador's New England gentility clashed with the Chicago native's blunt, "take-no-prisoners attitude." It was Lodge who gave Komer the lasting nickname "Blowtorch Bob" when he compared speaking with Komer to having a blowtorch applied to one's backside. Komer, for his part, felt that Lodge was a poor manager. In a memorandum to the president dated March 2, 1967, Komer urged Lodge's dismissal. He also wanted to sack Lodge's deputy, who was in charge of civilian pacification, in favor of a "better man." Finally, Komer advised Johnson that Ambassador William Leonhart, recently back from Tanzania after a severance of diplomatic relations there, should work full-time on Vietnamese issues. Johnson quickly approved all of Komer's personnel recommendations. The president replaced Lodge as ambassador to South Vietnam, named Komer to head the pacification program, and moved Leonhart to Komer's old advisory position.²⁶⁸

The administrative shuffle Komer engineered in March 1967 was an important moment for land reform. Komer championed what many called "the other war." This was the effort to win the loyalty of the population through economic growth. "Blowtorch Bob" had no patience with Lodge's vacillations or the government of South Vietnam's slow progress on matters of development. A recently released document shows that land reform was on Komer's agenda as early as the spring of 1966. He supported Cooper's calls for a strong new program, and was open to the idea "that land reform should be the key element in a package of economic reforms. . . which should be presented to the

²⁶⁸ Tim Weiner, obituary of Robert Komer, *New York Times*, April 12, 2000; Komer to Johnson, March 2, 1967, NSF, Vietnam, box 61, LBJL.

[government of Vietnam] with maximum U.S. pressure.” Komer later expressed “dismay” that Ambassador Lodge decided not to back Cooper's proposal. However, the detail-driven Komer sometimes lost sight of the big picture. Bredo had this tendency of Komer's in mind when he criticized those who believed “the hearts and minds of the peasants could be won by increasing the supply of fertilizer and pesticides, by introducing [high-yield] rice, improved hogs and poultry, by improving the credit system, and by providing the farmer with more technical information.” If Komer's increased role did not guarantee land reform's revival, it certainly created a more favorable atmosphere for dramatic developmental programs of the kind Bredo would soon propose.²⁶⁹

The day after Johnson announced the personnel changes, Leonhart submitted a plan to “get the [government of Vietnam] moving on land reform” within the year. The first step, he wrote, was to conduct a detailed study on landholding patterns in rural South Vietnam. The Stanford Research Institute was already “ready to go.” The Institute, one of America's leading think tanks, received tens of millions of dollars each year in government and private contracts to research everything from missile defense to claims of psychic powers. USAID commissioned the Institute to create a report on the past, present, and future potential of land reform in South Vietnam. The Institute sent a preliminary survey team to the country in early 1967, and in February the team produced a proposal for a more detailed study to take place later that year. Bredo, a social scientist and agricultural development expert for the Institute, headed the project. Much of

²⁶⁹ Memorandum to Robert Komer, May 21, 1966, NSF, Komer-Leonhart File, box 12, LBJL; “Memorandum of Conversation, August 23, 1966,” August 25, 1966, NSF, Komer-Leonhart File, box 1, LBJL; Bredo, “Agrarian Reform in Vietnam,” 744.

USAID's 1967 budget went to financing the Institute's fieldwork, which culminated in a five-volume report that provided the statistical foundation for a strong land reform policy.²⁷⁰

The reception Bredo's team received in Vietnam illustrates the significance of the March 1967 administrative changes. In a letter from the Saigon embassy to the White House ten days before Komer's personnel recommendations took effect, Rosenthal expressed his misgivings about “the thought of a dozen or two high-powered academic types going out with a 'mission' on land reform.” Later that year, after the personnel changes, Komer himself met the Institute team in Saigon. He pressed Bredo's team to provide more than a mere “factual basis” for land reform; he wanted them to write a “comprehensive land tenure policy.” Clearly, historian Gabriel Kolko's assertion that in “early 1967 Komer no longer considered it [land reform] important” is simply wrong, and runs counter to his finding that “most senior American advisors favored land reform throughout this period.” To be sure, even after March 1967 there were officials and observers who doubted the desirability of a sweeping land reform package. Moreover, when Bredo's team release its final report the following year, even many land reform advocates found its contents underwhelming. Nevertheless, the institutional changes Komer effected in Saigon and Washington in early 1967 created the most receptive

²⁷⁰ Jefferson P. Marquis, “The Other Warriors: American Social Scientists and Nation Building in Vietnam,” *Diplomatic History* 24, no. 1 (Winter 2000), 93; Leonhart to Rostow, March 17, 1967, NSF, Vietnam, box 61, LBJL; “Science: The Magician and the Think Tank,” *Time*, March 12, 1973; “Progress Report on Secretary Freeman's Recommendations for Vietnam Agriculture,” March 1967, NSF, Komer-Leonhart File, box 1, LBJL; Stanford Research Institute, *Land Reform in Vietnam Working Papers Volume I, Part I*, 1.

atmosphere for a new agrarian reform program in over a decade.²⁷¹

The next and most dramatic tipping point was, perhaps unsurprisingly, bad press. The headline in the December 17, 1967 issue of *The Washington Star* summarized the story with stark simplicity: “Viet Cong Beat Saigon at Land Reform, House Unit Says.” The “unit” was the House Foreign Operations and Government Information subcommittee. Its chairman and ranking minority member were John Moss and Ogden Reid, respectively. The two representatives had just made public a letter to Secretary of State Dean Rusk in which they lambasted the Johnson administration's ineptitude on “the pressing problems of land reform” in South Vietnam. As a result of this inaction, Moss and Reid alleged, the communist insurgency was free to pursue its own land reform and was winning the hearts and minds of rural Vietnamese citizens.²⁷²

Moss, a Democrat from California's 3rd district in the Sacramento area, had a history of needling the federal government and the Vietnam war effort. A “quiet but combative former businessman,” he joined the Navy during World War II and won a seat in California's state assembly shortly thereafter. Beginning with his first term in the U.S. House of Representatives in the early 1950s, Moss championed government transparency. He created the House Committee on Government Information in 1955 and spent much of his long public career working for the release of classified government documents. In June 1966 Moss and several of his committee members visited Vietnam to highlight USAID's misuse of funds. Given his suspicion of the government and his interest in

²⁷¹ Rosenthal to Morsteen [sic], March 6, 1967, NSF, Komer-Leonhart File, box 12, LBJL; Heymann to Leonhart, June 23, 1967, NSF, Komer-Leonhart File, box 12, LBJL; Kolko, 244. See also Sansom to Rostow, November 16, 1968, NSF, Vietnam, box 61, LBJL.

²⁷² “Viet Cong Beat Saigon at Land Reform, House Unit Says,” *Washington Star*, December 17, 1967.

Vietnam, it was perhaps inevitable that Moss would sniff out the government's weakness on agrarian reform.²⁷³

Reid was a Republican from the 26th district in western New York. He was perhaps best known as the former publisher of the *New York Herald Tribune*, which he and his wife Mary ran jointly in the late 1950s. His nickname was “Brownie,” apparently for no other reason than that his older brother Whitelaw, named after their famous grandfather, a nineteenth century diplomat and newsman, went by “Whitey.” The affable Ogden frequented the Artist & Writers' Club, “a kind of cave inhabited by giants of journalism” located downstairs from the *Herald Tribune* offices. When he and his wife sold the newspaper he entered politics, first as ambassador to Israel and then as a U.S. representative. As a congressman, Reid fought against the requirement that college students swear a “loyalty oath” when receiving federal financial aid. His constituents would send him back to Capitol Hill even when he switched party affiliations during Nixon's presidency. Like Moss, Reid was unafraid to take on the White House.²⁷⁴

The Johnson administration knew that trouble was brewing in Congressman Moss' subcommittee. Suspicion generally focused on “Brownie” Reid, however, perhaps because he was a Republican. In a newly declassified document dated October 1966, Komer told then-ambassador Lodge that there was a growing pressure in the American

²⁷³ “The Congress: Bureaucracy Unbounded,” *Time*, July 1, 1966; John Emerson Moss entry, Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, accessed November 12, 2010, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=M001035>; “The War: Strayed AID,” *Time*, May 20, 1966.

²⁷⁴ “Editors: Rage on the Sports Page,” *Time*, December 10, 1965; Obituary of Whitelaw Reid, *New York Times*, April 19, 2009; “Hangouts: The Place Downstairs,” *Time*, May 3, 1963; “The Press: Newsman v. Newsman,” *Time*, March 20, 1964; “Loyalty Oath,” *New York Times*, June 7, 1965.

media and on Capitol Hill regarding land reform, and named Reid as a prime instigator. Nevertheless, from mid-1967 on the administration referred to the looming Congressional criticism as “the Moss report.” The report that Moss and Reid were compiling sent White House staff into a near panic and weighed heavily on the minds of the president's staff during the winter of 1967-1968. Johnson was still planning to run for reelection and did not relish criticism from Congress, particularly from a Democratic committee chairman, about the war in Vietnam.²⁷⁵

Moss and Reid first seized on the issue of land reform in August 1967 as part of their series of critiques of the war effort. Secretary of State Dean Rusk told them that the matter was “being studied.” Former ambassador Lodge weighed in, saying that the lack of initiative on land reform was the fault of the Vietnamese, not the U.S. government. But internally, the administration was much concerned about the negative press that Moss and Reid's report might bring to the issue. On August 15, Komer privately concurred with Moss and Reid's assessment. “On land reform” he wrote, “let's face the fact that the Government of Vietnam performance is unimpressive.” Komer felt that the best “rebuttal to the Moss Subcommittee attacks” was to implement the new land reform suggestions coming from the Stanford Research Institute.²⁷⁶

But a new program could take months to come into effect, and Moss and Reid's report was nearly ready for release. Reid, in particular, was “so exercised about the problem” that he felt a “dramatic and sweeping' land reform should be a condition for

²⁷⁵ Komer to Lodge, October 8, 1966, NSF, Komer-Leonhart File, box 12, LBJL.

²⁷⁶ “Moss, Reid Again Demand That Saigon Be Forced to Effect Promised Land Reforms,” *Washington Post*, December 17, 1967; Komer, August 15, 1967, NSF, Vietnam, box 59, LBJL.

any further U.S. aid to South Vietnam.” In November, as Moss' subcommittee prepared to publish its official report, Leonhart wrote a desperate memorandum to Barefoot Sanders, the president's legal counsel. He said that since it was probably impossible to have the report “quietly shelved,” the next best thing was to “get publication delayed for about sixty days.” That would hopefully give the U.S. embassy enough time to spur the Vietnamese government into action on a new land reform initiative and preempt the criticism. Leonhart asked Sanders to use his influence to delay the report. Rumor in Washington also had it that “the White House had exerted pressure to tone down the language of the report before its release.”²⁷⁷

With their report stalled in the process of review by a higher committee, Moss and Reid prepared to leak its contents to the press. The report called for a reduction in landowners' maximum hectare limit to less than five hectares, a major change from the 100 plus an additional 15 hectares allowed under Ordinance 57, and far more specific than any policy the White House, the embassy in Saigon, or the government of South Vietnam had yet put forth. On December 14, in a last bid to avoid a public relations nightmare, Leonhart had land reform advisor Price Gittinger call Moss and Reid from Saigon. “I stayed out of it,” Leonhart added, “in order not to risk press allegations that the White House wished the report delayed.” After Gittinger had spoken to the congressmen, Leonhart thought Moss would “go along” with the delay, but he suspected that Reid might proceed with the leak. “We're not completely out of the woods,” he

²⁷⁷ Richard Harwood, “Moss, Reid Again Demand That Saigon Be Forced to Effect Promised Land Reforms,” *Washington Post*, December 17, 1967; Leonhart to Sanders, November 13, 1967, NSF, Vietnam, box 61, LBJL; Robert Walters, “Viet Cong Beat Saigon at Land Reform, House Unit Says,” *Washington Star*, December 17, 1967.

admitted. Two days later, at around 6:30 PM, the White House received an advance copy of a United Press International wire service article. It began, "Congressional investigators claimed Saturday [December 16] that South Vietnam's land reform program is little more than a package of promises. In comparison, they said, the Viet Cong are winning the loyalty of peasants with an effective program of their own." Major newspapers ran versions of the story the next day.²⁷⁸

TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE

The White House tried to control the damage. Despite the leak, the administration continued to ask Moss to "shelve or revise" the unreleased full report. Dean Rusk sent a lengthy and pointedly polite letter to Congressman Moss in which he attempted to debunk the data that Moss and Reid had collected. At the same time, economist Walt Rostow (about whom more will be said in the conclusion of this study) provided Johnson with a list of land reform actions already in progress. The list was mostly limited to the current attempts of the Vietnamese government to enforce Ordinance 57's weak provisions, but it gave the president some shelter against the recent criticisms. In a telegram to the embassy in Saigon in late January, however, Rusk was disarmingly honest about where land reform really stood in the winter of 1967-1968. The "Moss subcommittee report has begun to focus renewed attention on problem of land reform," he cabled. The White House had "been pointing so far to past reforms of Diem period, problems of security and administration since early 1960's, [and the government of

²⁷⁸ Leonhart to Rostow, December 14, 1967, NSF, Vietnam, box 61, LBJL; Advance copy of United Press International article, NSF, Vietnam, box 61, LBJL.

Vietnam's] resumption of limited programs since 1966.” But, Rusk admitted, these tactics amounted to nothing more than “a holding operation.” “[W]e need more substantial fare if explanations to remain credible,” he concluded. Congress finally released Moss and Reid's full report in March 1968. By then a new and improved land reform program was only a matter of time.²⁷⁹

Unfortunately, time was something the Republic of Vietnam no longer had in abundance. The same was true of the Johnson administration. In March, after an embarrassing primary result, the president declared that he would neither seek nor accept his party's nomination. Work on land reform continued. Marshall Wright of the National Security Council wrote a positive review of the Stanford Research Institute's finished report when it finally appeared in the fall of 1968. Rostow wrote an exuberant memo to the president in which he claimed that USAID had finally “found the key to the land reform dilemma.” The solution was as simple as it was overdue: buy land from landlords and distribute it to tenant farmers, devise a system to compensate landlords and help farmers purchase the land they till, and promote security of tenure for remaining tenants. Just a few months before leaving office, Johnson approved a proposal to make these initiatives official U.S. policy.²⁸⁰

For a time, a spirit of optimism prevailed. In the spring of 1969 the Vietnamese government announced the Land to the Tiller Law, which took effect the next year. The

²⁷⁹ Leonhart to Rostow, January 21, 1968, NSF, Vietnam, box 61, LBJL; Rusk to Moss, January 19, 1968, NSF, Vietnam, box 61, LBJL; Rostow to Johnson, January 13, 1968, NSF, Vietnam, box 61, LBJL; Rusk to U.S. embassy, January 24[?], 1968, NSF, Vietnam, box 61, LBJL.

²⁸⁰ Wright to Rostow, September 10, 1968, NSF, Vietnam, box 58, LBJL; Rostow to Johnson, September 16, 1968, NSF, Vietnam, box 58, LBJL; Rostow to Johnson, October 18, 1968, NSF, Vietnam, box 61, LBJL.

law provided for the transference of several kinds of land. First, it was to finish the sale of all remaining land that was supposed to have been sold under Ordinance 57. Most if not all of this land was already under government ownership, at least formally. Second, the Land to the Tiller Law was to issue titles to “highland tribal peoples” who were working land individually or communally. Finally, the law would turn over all tenanted farmland to the tenants currently working it, at no cost, with the maximum amount per owner set at 15 hectares. Tenancy would therefore be entirely abolished, making this program the strongest since the Japanese land reform of 1946. All intervening programs had allowed for the preservation of some amount of tenancy. The U.S. would fund the program and village-level bodies would implement it. Bredo predicted that the United States and South Vietnam would win the war as a result of the new law.²⁸¹

Yet the war was not fought on paper, and it was only on paper that the law existed. Landlords in South Vietnam, including many military officers and governmental officials, simply refused to comply with it, and there was nobody to make them. By 1973, when the United States drastically downscaled its presence in Vietnam, observers concluded that as many as 30% “of all tenants, sharecroppers, or squatters on privately owned land had not been affected.” Observers put some of the blame on the would-be recipients of land, citing “inability to apply, fear of landlords, ignorance, and moral taboos,” but stressed that “the unwillingness of small landlords to transfer land and accept compensation is the barrier to distribution.” Some members of the South Vietnamese military would have been eligible to buy, and others would have been required to sell, but

²⁸¹ Salter, “The Broadening Base of Land Reform,” 731-33; Bredo, “Agrarian Reform in Vietnam,” 750.

by 1971 “more than half of the soldiers” in a particular study “had failed to apply for or declare their land.” As the United States retreated and the communists advanced, the Land to the Tiller Law was enacted only in a limited way in a small number of villages. Having come too late to make a difference, it ceased to be the law of the land with the fall of the South Vietnamese government in April 1975.²⁸²

More than a decade earlier, Diem had been unwilling to implement a strong program of redistribution or to enforce the not-so-strong version he tolerated. Under Ambassador Lodge, the U.S. embassy's reluctance to push the Vietnamese government on land reform hampered early efforts to revive it in 1965 and 1966. Komer's increased influence helped to create a more receptive atmosphere for land reform proposals beginning in early 1967, and bipartisan Congressional pressure forced the administration to make it a top priority at the beginning of 1968. A sweeping new law soon emerged, but South Vietnam had already missed its chance to ride the wave of land reform that swept through East Asia in the 1940s and 1950s. As Bredo reflected in a 1986 article, the “effort was definitely not a case of being 'too little too late', it was just too late – several years too late!”²⁸³

²⁸² Ledesma, 12-13. See Callison, *Land to the Tiller*, for an analysis of specific villages in which the law was briefly in effect.

²⁸³ William Bredo, “U.S. Security: Potential of Land Reform Policy Support in the Third World,” *Journal of Political & Military Sociology* 14, no. 2 (Fall 1986), 284.

Conclusion

From at least 1945 to 1969, “land-to-the-tiller” was standard policy in the parts of Asia where Washington's political influence was strong. Land reform meant nothing if it did not quickly and substantially broaden the base of landownership. No less than for communist reformers, who argued that economic equality and peasant ownership of the means of production were moral ends unto themselves, land redistribution was part of the ideology and ethos of American reformers. To the American way of thinking, the powerful status of Asian landlords was not the result of having triumphed in a free-market race to the top, but was the ill-gotten result of a feudalistic system that had never given poor farmers a chance. Redistribution dismantled “backward” economic and social structures and created the preconditions for farmers’ success and autonomy in the economic and political spheres.

The prefiguring example of the Philippines from 1902-1904 was ancient history when the streak of reforms between 1945 and 1969 got underway. Yet it inspired MacArthur and suggested that the homesteading of “virgin” soil, which was widely held to have created a Jeffersonian agricultural system in the United States, was no substitute for generous redistribution in the Asian context.

The planning for Japan’s reform started even before the American occupation began in 1945, but it took months of political wrangling to get the Japanese Diet to go along with what would become the preeminent example of American-style redistribution. The effectiveness of MacArthur’s GHQ in insisting upon a strong law, and of local land committees in enforcing it between 1947 and 1949, changed the pattern of landholding in

ways that defied the predictions of early skeptics. Scholars debated whether Japan's subsequent growth was a consequence of the land reform or a separate phenomenon that was merely unhindered by it, but to American reformers the rejuvenation of Japan after such fundamental change seemed to justify their efforts and their methods as they turned their attention to other nations.

At about the same moment, between 1946 and 1948, methods of reform in South Korea were more piecemeal. As the direct inheritors of formerly Japanese-owned land, American occupation authorities themselves took on the role of landlord. They quickly set about reducing rents and divesting themselves of their holdings, but it was left to the South Korean government to extend the reform to privately-owned land. It did, even amidst war, but progress was slower than in Japan and Taiwan.

In mainland China until 1949 and on Taiwan for the next several years, American reformers helped their Nationalist allies operate and finance a land reform commission that hewed closely to the principles Wolf Ladejinsky used in Japan. A key difference in the methodology was the existence in Taiwan of three separate laws spread out over a period of years. The program allowed for more tenancy than had been allowed in Japan, it more effectively compensated landlords, and it more overtly protected the interests of the state and of quasi-public interests like the sugar industry. Yet tenancy declined markedly and rural quality of life increased, so American reformers considered it a third success.

Between 1955 and 1969 South Vietnam was host to two generations of American land reformers, starting with the veteran Ladejinsky and ending with teams of contracted

social scientists and USAID personnel. Twice they tried and twice they succeeded in getting Vietnamese authorities to promulgate laws redistributing land to peasants, but the first law was weakened and abandoned by the country's first, illiberal president and the second one failed to arrive in time to stop the country's defeat in the Vietnam War, if it ever could have. If American lawmakers ignored the issue during the early 1960s, they were more public than ever in their advocacy of it in the later part of the decade. The stillborn Land to the Tiller Law in 1969 capped a quarter century or more in which Americans tried to remake Asian agriculture.

Why did land reform succeed in some places and not in others? Simple explanations are deceptive, and answers lie in the particulars of each case. On the most general level, though, it appears that more peaceful settings and more powerful, far-reaching governments enjoyed greater success. In occupied Japan, a strong political infrastructure meant that reform could be instituted at the highest level and executed by elected committees at the local level. In Taiwan the same was true even though Americans were not officially in control of island policy. In South Korea Americans were the highest authorities in the early stages of reform, but redistribution was far slower than in Japan and Taiwan due in part to the end of the American occupation and the outbreak of the Korean War. In South Vietnam, a nation supported by American advisers, guns, and money but beset by internal and external violence throughout its existence, the process of reform was not so much slow as halting, with promising spurts of activity in the late 1950s and late 1960s that simply could not gain traction amid the political uncertainty. Governmental strength was needed to enforce reform, and rural communities

not dislocated by conflict were needed to receive reform.

Why, during the period under study, was land redistribution the United States' preferred method for promoting democracy (whether in a vacuum or as an alternative to communism) and paving the way for economic growth? Conceivably, alternative means existed of achieving these ends. Economic growth was always a hope among American land reformers and an important part of their rationale for the programs, but it was often expected to be a delayed result of land reform, one that would require additional reforms throughout the economy. Reformers knew that land reform tended to shrink farms instead of enlarge them, and that larger farms might well produce more efficiently than small ones. Yet they chose, time and again, to pursue land redistribution instead of some other policy.

The work of developmental theorist and outspoken anticommunist Walt Rostow, who advised President Johnson on Vietnamese land reform as seen in chapter 6, provided a cogent economic justification for land reform. His best-known work did not appear until 1960, too late to influence most of the reforms in this study, and even after that one does not find him or his work discussed in the documents of land reformers. Yet if one cannot find Rostow in the work of reformers, one does see the reformers in the work of Rostow. As we have seen, American land reformers from the 1940s through the 1960s hoped to create nations of small, capitalistic, entrepreneurial landowners and to shift landlord capital into industry. Rostow, who became a public intellectual during the Vietnam War years and rather testily defended American efforts there, gave reformers' objectives a rigorous theoretical framework. He argued that for a developing economy to

reach “take-off,” its agricultural output had to increase *and* its profits had to accrue to a large base of innovative, entrepreneurial farmers who would invest in more development. A strong state, by taxing this broad and successful agricultural class, would transform growing agricultural surpluses into wealth and funnel it into burgeoning industrial sectors. Rostow’s theory was “the vogue among many U.S. government officials in the 1960s, especially in the international aid agencies,” but it is also a fair description of what Ladejinsky had tried to do in the 1940s and 1950s. Land redistribution was a way to grow the rural tax base, encourage more innovation in rural areas, and move rural wealth to the industrial sector through the state.²⁸⁴

Counterinsurgency motivated every reformer, and Ladejinsky not least. But nothing required that land redistribution be Americans’ weapon of choice against real or potential insurgencies. Other methods, like the strategic hamlet program in South Vietnam, offered alternatives. Occasionally, a dissenting voice emerged — “Red” Leonard in Occupied Japan, nervous State Department staffers during the Wisconsin conference preparations, an Agriculture Department security officer in the Ladejinsky affair — to try to shelve, downplay, or criticize Washington’s support for land redistribution, which after all was a stated goal of communist cadres. The bureaucracy, the press, the academic community, military leaders, and presidents themselves responded forcefully to such critiques and ensured that land redistribution remained official American policy.

²⁸⁴ E. Wayne Nafziger, *Economic Development*, Fourth Edition (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 128-131. Rostow’s book is *The Stages of Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, published in 1960. His testy personality is displayed in the Academy Award-winning Vietnam War documentary *Hearts and Minds* (1974).

The answer to why land redistribution found such wide and consistent support among American policymakers is found in the way Americans thought about themselves. For American policymakers, the idea of land redistribution had deep ideological roots. Almost everyone who worked on the various Asian reforms viewed redistribution as a positive good, not as a reactive measure or a necessary evil. It was a means to several ends, but it was also a moral end unto itself. It was fundamentally desirable to bureaucrats and scholars regardless of whether their focus was agricultural development or counterinsurgency. They had absorbed and repeated among themselves the populist, ethics-driven, Jeffersonian argument that land ought to belong to the person who worked it. Though, rather than “person” or “individual,” the word of choice was often “family.” The family farm was, to mid-twentieth century American policymakers, the most fundamental unit of a democratic republic. Farm households had a moral right, almost a moral duty, to exist independently and self-sufficiently. This moral imperative, sometimes stated and sometimes tacit, underlay the economic and political motives for land redistribution.

Scholar Kenneth Parsons, co-organizer of the Wisconsin conference, echoed Rostow and summarized the “Western” agricultural ideals that American policymakers tried to export to Asia:

The basic tenure pattern which has been woven into the experience of Western man is essentially that which was proposed by classical liberalism, and whose economic functioning was formulated in neoclassical economics. . . This is the basic pattern which was adopted in Japan after World War II. The agricultural economy is based upon private ownership of land, individual entrepreneurship geared partially into a market economy, with credit facilities, appropriate education, market information, and so on.

Any tenorial pattern other than individual plots run by market-oriented entrepreneurs was contrary to the spirit of “Western man.” To redistribute land occupied by such archaic classifications of people as landlords and tenants was to replace an Eastern, feudal model with an idealized Western model. Of course, real tenure conditions in the United States had never been what Parsons and other reform advocates argued was the West’s “basic tenure pattern.” But the homegrown ideological appeal of land redistribution was as much a motivation for reformers as the apparent threat of communist advances in underdeveloped areas and the apparent fact of underdevelopment itself. It was a belief in the goodness of land redistribution, its promise of “the greatest good for the greatest number,” that made it a bedrock of American foreign policy in Asia in the middle of the twentieth century.²⁸⁵

²⁸⁵ Kenneth Parsons, “Problems of United States Policy” in *Land Tenure, Industrialization, and Social Stability: Experience and Prospects in Asia*, edited by Walter Froehlich (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1961), 286; Fippin, “Observations on Agrarian Reform in Vietnam,” 6.

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This dissertation was typed by the author.